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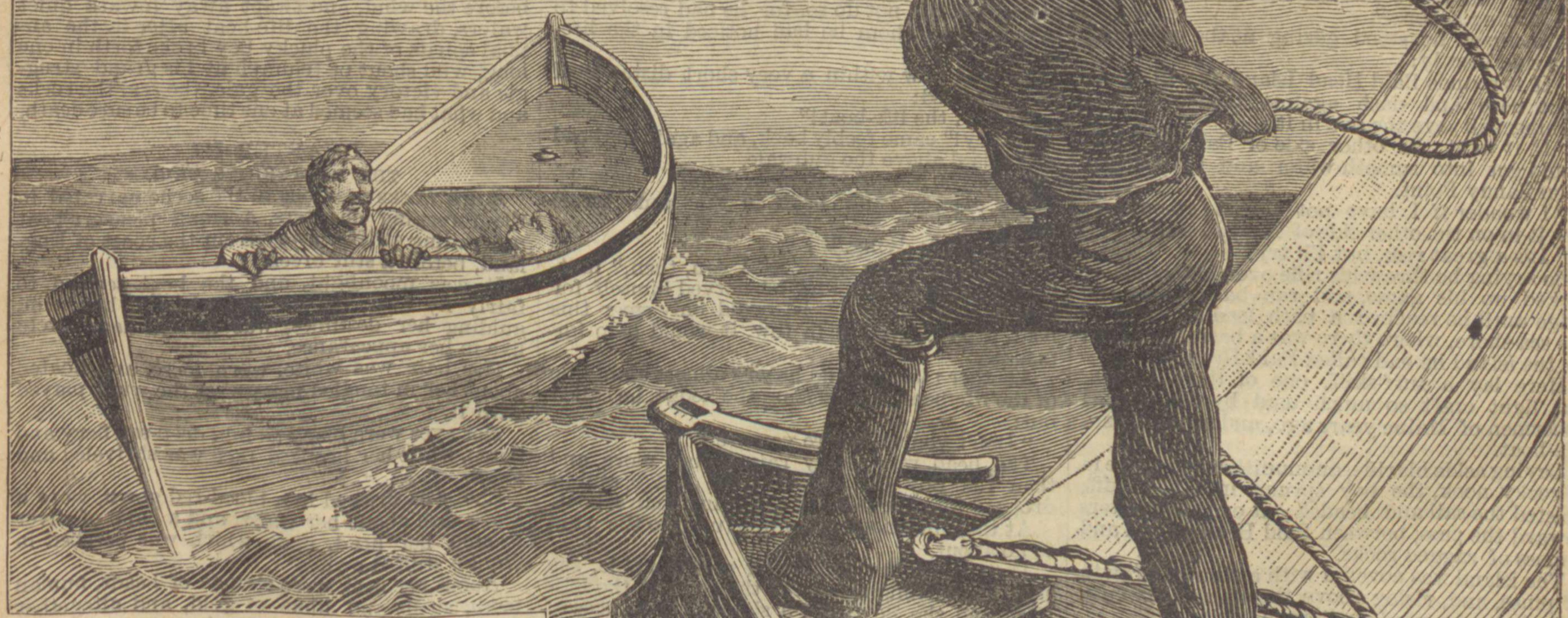
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NEPTUNE NED



OR,
Pirate in Spite of Himself.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "WIZARD WILL," "A CABIN BOY'S
LUCK," "DUNCAN DARE, THE BOY
REFUGEE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FISHER LAD.

A BOY stood upon a rocky cliff, jutting out into the sea like the huge bow of some ship of the line, and commanding an expansive view of the rock-bound coast not very far from where the Kennebec River flows into the Atlantic.

A boy of fifteen, with a handsome, manly face, bold as an Indian's, and almost as brown, with eyes that wore that far-away look which comes to those accustomed to gaze at objects at

THE BOY COASTER

THE HEAD WAS FEEBLY RAISED ONCE MORE, AND THEN THE BOY COASTER CAST THE
KEDGE, AND IT DROPPED INTO THE BOW OF THE DYING MAN'S BOAT.

a great distance, and a form lithe, graceful and well-developed for his years.

His hair was long, waving, and of chestnut hue, an exact match in color for his expressive eyes, and the fierce wind then blowing waved the locks about his shoulders and added to his picturesque attitude, for he stood leaning upon a small rifle, each hand resting upon the muzzle.

At his feet, which were bare and brown, yet shapely, lay a string of game, proofs of his unerring aim—squirrels, quail, and a duck.

He wore a blue woolen shirt, with a black scarf, tied in a sailor knot about the neck, and a pair of duck pants, soiled by his hunt in the forest, and upon his head was a tarpaulin.

He was attentively watching the storm, for the skies were overcast with many storm-clouds, and the sea was wild under the force of the angry wind, and rolling in in huge breakers, broke against the cliff with a force that made it tremble.

"It is a bad blow, and I'll have to sleep in my boat, or walk home, for it's too rough to attempt running along the coast to the cove," he muttered.

A moment after he said:

"I'll walk home, for mother might be anxious about me, as there is such a storm on the sea; it's a long way, but I'll walk it in a couple of hours, I guess, though bare feet are not just what I need for the journey.

"Ah me! I do wish I could make some money and give mother and father a better name; but I can see no way now, though if war broke out I might do better.

"If I had more money I'd go down to Boston to school, for I wish to learn something and become a great man.

"But no, I am only a poor fisher lad, and since father was crippled I have to work pretty hard for food for us all—Why what is that?" he said suddenly, as he was about to start for home, and his eyes fell upon an object out upon the ocean.

"It is a boat, as true as I live," and making a telescope of his hand he continued:

"It is a white boat, and there is surely somebody in it—there! as she rises on that wave I can see that there is some one in it, and she is fast coming ashore."

A moment he stood gazing at the boat, and then said hastily:

"If it rounds Bald Head Island, it will come right here and dash against the cliff, and nothing will save the one in it.

"If it went the other side of Bald Head it would get into smooth water and be beached upon Sandy Point.

"I wonder if I have not time to go out and tow it in on the other side of Bald Head?

"It's a great risk, but I'll try."

So saying he threw his rifle over his shoulder, picked up his game, and ran back along the ridge until he reached a path leading down to the sea-shore, where there was a basin, sheltered by the island he had called Bald Head.

Here lay a surf-skiff, one of those stanch, but light craft so much used by the rugged fishermen of Maine years ago, and as stiff as a life-boat.

Laying aside his rifle, ammunition and game in a rocky nook, the boy sprung into the skiff, hoisted the sail and headed out over the waters toward the pass, between Bald Head Island and a mass of ragged rocks.

The island was covered with a stunted growth of pines, and, rising above the sea some twenty feet, formed a good anchorage behind it.

It was several hundred feet in length, and in the center rose a barren rock with a round top, from which it took its name.

Running out to the island under full sail, the boy there luffed up sharp, and reefed down until the canvas spread was very small.

Then he threw his ballast-bag to windward, adding his own weight, and that like an arrow cut from under the lee, into the narrow pass between the island and the reef.

Through the wild waters he dashed, his surf-skiff leaping wildly, but he cleared the passage without tacking, and held on out into the ocean, riding the large waves better than he had the chop seas near shore.

His face was pale but resolute, and his keen eyes were sweeping the waters for the boat he had despaired from the cliff.

"There she is!" he cried, as he discerned it, and instantly he threw his ballast-bag to starboard, put his helm hard down, and went about.

He now had the wind abeam, and the surf-skiff lurched low at times, lay well over, and seemed fairly to fly; but the brave boy lay far

out to windward, his ballast-bag of sand was laid upon the gunwale, and he felt that he could reach the drifting boat all right if he could only then get back into the passage through which he had come.

If he failed, he knew death was certain, for no vessel could stem the rush of waters around the west point of Bald Head Island, which rushed in huge seas against the base of the cliff upon which he had been standing when he sighted the boat off upon the waters.

But though a mere boy, the brave little fellow seemed to have mastered the knowledge of seamanship, and cared little for the huge waves and howling winds, could he be able to reach the boat in time to work off again from the danger with it in tow and regain the channel by which he had gone out.

It was a race between pluck and death, with the chances in favor of the latter.

As he drew near the boat he saw its occupant half rise, wave a hand toward him in a feeble way, and fall back.

"If I can reach the boat before it strikes the surf, I can save him; if not, I must die, too," said the brave boy, as his little surf-skiff leaped over the storm-swept waters.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIGHT FOR LIFE.

As the fisher lad drew near the drifting boat, he arranged to run to windward of it, and drop the little anchor of his skiff into its bows.

Holding the tiller aga'inst his knee, he tied the cable to the length he deemed about right, doubled it, and had all ready to cast it into the boat as he swept by.

He seemed to understand just what was best to be done and how to do it.

He then kept his eye on the one he meant to try and rescue, and saw that there was but one occupant, as far as he could discover as his little craft rose on the top of a wave.

The boat was a life-boat from some ship, light upon the waters, high gunwales, and some sixteen feet long.

"She's about as long as my skiff, and it will be a hard tug to tow her off against this sea and gale," he muttered; but though he knew he had ample time to put about, and thus escape death himself, he did not do so, for he had resolved to save the one whom he had noticed in the life-boat.

He was now within a very short distance of it, and hailed:

"Ahoy, the life-boat!"

"Ahoy!" came feebly back, and again the head was raised above the gunwale.

"Are you able to help me a little?"

The answer came back in the same feeble voice:

"No; I am dying."

"I've got to do the best I can, then," muttered the brave boy, and he nerved himself for the task, adding: "If he could only steer this boat, after I get her in tow, it would help immensely."

Another moment and he was almost alongside of the life-boat, and, seizing the kedge, he called out:

"Don't you see where you are?"

The head was feebly raised once more, and then the Boy Coaster cast the kedge, and it dropped into the bows of the dying man's boat.

At the same moment he went up into the wind to go about.

Then came the tightening of the cable, the jerk, the turning around of the bows of the life-boat, and the boy gave a shout at his success, which was echoed by a feeble cry from the occupant of the boat, for the little anchor had caught a good hold.

As the life-boat felt the pull upon it, it leaped terribly; but the boy held steadily on, back over his course, well knowing that he had not a moment to lose.

One moment the surf-skiff was down in the hollow of the sea and the life-boat far above it, and then their positions were reversed.

Then the skiff climbed up the side of a huge wave, while the life-boat was out of sight beyond one its leader had just gone over.

The boy held his tiller firmly, easing his skiff all in his power, holding his sheet-rope in one hand also, ready to let off, or haul taut, as the case needed, and paying close attention also to just how he met the seas, and dragged the life-boat after him.

Then his eyes constantly sought the island, to note the speed at which he was going, and he shuddered as he saw that he was barely making headway.

Taking a point on the cliff and the end of the island as a guide, he did not look at it again for

nearly ten minutes, and then he saw that the object had disappeared which he had taken as a guide.

The one in the life-boat now and then feebly raised his head to note the result, and then dropped back again, as though the effort had been prostrating.

Seeing this the boy called:

"We are all right, though its slow work."

And slow work it was, and the boy was not sure about being all right, for the sea was forcing him gradually toward the rocky island, against which the waves pounded with terrific force.

Could he round the point, he would be "all right," but it was a question as to whether he could make it, or be dashed against the rocky shore.

To cast the life-boat adrift the boy could make it alone, be knew; but he would not desert the one he had so imperiled his life to save, and he stuck manfully to his work.

Nearer and nearer he drew to the pass between the island and the reef, and nearer and nearer he drew to the ragged shore.

"Will I make it?" he muttered, and his face was anxious, though yet full of pluck.

"Another moment will tell whether I can round the island into the channel, or be dashed to pieces on the rocks," muttered the boy, and the one in the life-boat, as though also realizing the full importance of a minute of time, again raised his head over the gunwale, glanced at the island so dangerously near, at the channel-way, and then at the brave boy.

"You cannot make it, my brave boy, so cut loose and save yourself," cried the man in the life-boat, his voice hardly audible.

"I will not desert you now, sir! I will make the channel, or go on the rocks with you," came back defiantly from the brave boy's lips.

Then followed a moment of awful agony, the skiff shot ahead into the channel, the life-boat swung round, as though to go upon the rocks, and for a second as though it would drag the towing craft with her; but the boy hauled his sheet-rope more taut, and though laying frighteningly far over, it helped, and the man so nearly lost was hauled away from his danger.

Then, as the surf-skiff shot into the channel before the wind, and swept away toward quiet waters, drawing the life-boat after it, the animal spirits of the plucky boy broke forth in one long, wild shout of triumph at his grand struggle and victory over the gale, the sea, the rocks and what had seemed at one time to be sure death.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS TRIO.

SOME weeks previous to the scene narrated in the foregoing chapters, a small pleasure-boat was sailing swiftly away from the coast of England, before a stiff breeze.

It was moonlight, and the boat seemed to fairly fly over the waters; while at her helm, guiding her destinies, was an old hag, witch-like in her appearance.

Her hair was white, worn loose, and floated about her in tangled masses, as the wind played with it.

Her eyes were black as ink, deep-set, fiery and fierce, while her bronzed face was shriveled and stern.

She was dressed in a blood-red gown, wore a black sash about her waist, and a band of silver around her head, upon which was perched in front a stuffed owl.

About her neck were strings of beads, human teeth, shells and links of gold, and altogether she was a weird-looking creature.

The boat was a handsome one, some three tons measurement, with a small cabin, and sloop rig.

Evidently it was the pleasure craft, or yacht, from some home of wealth along the coast.

The woman was not the only occupant, however, for just forward of the cabin sat two persons.

One of them was a young man of twenty-four or five, with a handsome, noble face, as the moonlight revealed it.

He was well-dressed, and a gentleman.

His companion by his side was a maiden of eighteen, with a darkly-bronzed face, black hair, and possessing a beauty that was radiant.

She was dressed neatly in black, wore a sun-hat, and looked toward the man at her side as though her whole soul was wrapped up in him.

"I see a sail dead ahead, good Mother Molsey," said the young man, who had a spyglass in his hand, with which he often scoured the sea.

"It is one of the American clipper ships, I guess; just what we wish," was the answer of the woman at the helm, her voice seeming harsh and stern.

"Then we are safe; but I hate to see you go back all alone, as we have about dropped the land from sight," said the young man.

"I do not mind it, for sea and land are alike my home, and this yacht will be safely at her anchorage before dawn, and no one know that she has left it to-night."

"Keep your eye upon the vessel, and let me know how she heads," and the woman spoke in a commanding tone.

"I see the vessel now, and she is coming towards us, it seems," remarked the maiden, as she glanced out over the moonlit waters.

"Yes, but is not a packet as Mother Molsey thought, for they are merely clipper ships, or barques, and this is a brig; but her course leads me to think she is America bound."

"I hope so, for we will then be safe," was the maiden's low reply.

In fully an hour more the vessel was not very far off, a signal was made with a lantern from the yacht, and then came the hail in the voice of the maid helmsman.

"Ahoy, the brig!"

"Ho, the yacht?" was the response in gruff tones.

"Whither bound?"

"To Boston in America."

"I have two passengers for you."

"This is not a passenger packet."

"It matters not; you'll be well paid for your trouble, and they are not particular as to accommodations."

"It is worth a hundred pounds."

"You shall have it."

"All right, I'll round to, and you run alongside to leeward."

A moment after the yacht glided under the lee of the brig, and the three on her decks boarded the vessel, while some of the crew made the little craft fast alongside.

"A witch, as I'm a sinner!" cried the boatswain, as he caught sight of the strange looking woman, who went into the cabin with the young man and maiden.

"Here is your price, captain, and you can land us in Boston," and the young man handed the skipper of the brig a bag of gold as he spoke.

"All right, mate, I'll get you there safe and sound; but don't say that queer thing is going," and the captain looked at the woman.

"No, she goes back in the yacht," was the cold response of the young man, who then turned and offered his hand to the woman, who had just kissed the maiden farewell.

"Write to me, and expect to hear from me in return."

"Good-by, and as you are good to her, so may you be happy," and the woman left the cabin, sprung upon the yacht, cast a handful of dust, that looked like fiery sparks, after the brig and sailed away.

"She's queered us, mates," muttered a sailor.

"Yes, we'll never get safe to port, and the skipper was a fool to let her board us," said another.

"I think she was a witch, and if so, the brig is doomed," replied a third, and as the yacht disappeared from sight, and the brig sailed on its way over the moonlit waters, the crew became more and more impressed with the fact that bad luck would follow in their wake during the voyage.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ILL-OMENED PAIR.

A MONTH has passed, and the brig, which took on board the mysterious couple, is off the coast of Newfoundland.

A terrible storm is raging, the topmasts have been carried away, and driving before the gale she wallows fearfully.

Her crew stand at their posts, grim, silent, and dreading the worst, for the vessel has had naught but ill-fortune on her run across the Atlantic.

First a mate took sick and died, and one night soon after the boatswain had sprung into the sea, taking his own life, though why, none of his messmates knew.

A few days following a leak had been sprung forward, and in a blow that followed one of the men had been washed overboard.

"It's the queering the old witch gave us," murmured a sailor, and his words were agreed to by all.

As for the couple of passengers, they were very quiet, remained by themselves all they could, seldom spoke unless addressed, and seemed to be content with their position on board the brig.

Arriving off Newfoundland a terrific gale sprung up, and the vessel was driven along at

tremendous speed, and all feared she would be lost.

The night was one of dread, and yet the young couple never came on deck to ask regarding their danger.

Toward morning the leak broke out afresh; the vessel was old, and it could not be kept down with the pumps, and the captain gave orders to prepare the boats so that all hands could leave the sinking vessel.

The seamen at once went aft in a body, and asked:

"Will you take the two with us in the boats, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then we will not go in the boat with you, sir, and you must remain with them on the brig, for they are ill-omened folks, and have given us bad luck."

"Leave them here, sir, and we will be glad to have you go, but not with them," said the spokesman of the crew.

The captain stormed, urged, begged, but all to no purpose, and he was compelled to either remain with the ill-omened couple or go with the crew.

Between the two alternatives he chose to save himself, and so the vessel was hove to, the boats were provisioned and lowered, then the men got into them, and away they pulled, leaving the couple in the cabin not knowing how they were being deserted.

The sun was well up in the heavens when the young man came on deck.

He started, turned deadly pale, and hastily searched the ship.

Not a soul could be found!

The gale had blown itself out, and a dead calm had followed, which stilled the waters.

Nowhere on the ocean was a sail or boat visible, for aided by their canvas, the two boats had gone rapidly landward, and soon were out of sight.

The brig was settling fast, and the young man knew his danger.

It was evident that he was no sailor; but he was brave and strong, and the men had left the life-boat, which was the smallest of the three boats on board.

It hung at the stern davits, and could be lowered into the sea without much difficulty.

But the brig was surely and rapidly going down, and the water was almost level with her decks.

"I have not a moment to lose," said the young man, and he darted into the cabin.

A moment after he returned with the young woman, a carpet-bag, and a bundle of bed-clothing, while she had a tray of provisions, hastily gathered from the pantry.

These were thrown into the life-boat, and both saw there was not a moment to be lost.

A keg of water was then seized, and being but partially filled, the young man was going to fill it at the water-casks, when a warning cry from his beautiful companion warned him of his danger, as well as did the lurch that the brig gave.

Instantly he threw the cask into the boat, and it was lowered into the sea, the maiden standing by one rope and aiding.

"Quick! spring into the boat, Vesta," cried the man, and she obeyed.

An instant after he followed her, and oars were seized and the life-boat urged swiftly away from the sinking vessel.

But, not a second too soon, for the brig gave a fearful lurch, then a plunge and went bow first beneath the sea, causing a perfect cauldron of waters to follow her, and drawing the boat toward it with frightful velocity.

But the man was strong, handled the oars with vigor and skill, and instead of following the brig down into the depths of the sea, the life-boat was left dancing upon the tossing waters.

"We are saved!" cried the man joyfully.

"From instant death, Melton, yes; but we are adrift upon the wide seas, in a frail boat, with but a few days' provisions and water, and I feel that we will never reach the shore," said the maiden sadly.

"Do not get blue, Vesta, for we will yet land and be happy," was the reply.

"No, I feel that we will not, and the judgment has come upon us, for it was never intended that your race and mine should be man and wife."

"I loved you, oh so dearly, Melton, and I told Mother Molsey that if I did not wed you I would die by my own hand."

"See! I am your wife and this is the end, for we are doomed, Melton."

The young woman spoke with deep earnestness, but was yet calm in the face of her forebodings.

"That coward crew deserted us, or we might

now be safe, for they are sailors and know how to reach the land, while we must wait to drift ashore, or hope to be picked up by some passing vessel.

"But I do not give up hope, Vesta, not by any means, and I shall not say die until I feel all is lost," was the plucky response of the young man.

But the maiden was not imbued with his spirit, and seemed to have made up her mind that there was no hope, and so believing she began to fail in strength from that moment.

In vain was it that her husband strove to cheer her, and urged her to eat, drink and be hopeful; she ate mechanically, and when night came on seemed much cast down.

When the morning came there was no sail in sight, no land in view, and the young man was startled to see the change in his companion.

Her face was haggard and her eyes sunken.

"Why, Vesta, you must not lose your grip, for I tell you I have every hope for us," he said.

She smiled sadly, but made no reply, and thus another day and night passed.

They had but little left in the way of food, and the woman seemed dying of thirst, and drank incessantly from their small supply of water.

Another day found her still more weak and wretched, and the man at last realized that she was dying.

During the night her spirit left the body, and she just faded away like one going to sleep, saying sadly:

"Kiss me good-by, Melton."

He kissed her lips over and over again, until suddenly he uttered a wail of anguish, for he knew that she was dead.

The night passed away and the day came, but he would not consign her body to the deep while she was with him, dead though she was; he had hope that she might yet live to see the land.

He had eaten his last morsel of food, drained the last drop of water from the little tank, and could but await the end.

His grief was intense also, and the pangs of hunger soon broke in upon his strong frame, and he felt that he must die, and soon.

Suddenly he raised himself and beheld land in sight.

But it could but bring death to him, for there was a storm raging, and the sea was running very high, while the coast was forbidding and rocky in the extreme.

He tried to raise himself to work, but was too weak, and fell back in the bottom of the boat by the body of his dead wife.

Then he heard a hail, and yet was too feeble to answer it loudly.

Then he beheld a strange sight—a mere boy daring danger and death to come to his rescue.

But he could lend the plucky fellow no aid, and could merely utter a prayer when he found his life-boat taken in tow and dragged back from the jaws of death into which it was rushing.

He saw the noble, brave fight for life that the boy was making, and he wished to have him save himself and leave him to his fate.

But no! the brave fisher lad was of sterner material than that, and so fought nature in her angry mood, fought against death so gallantly that he at last won, and the life-boat, with its dead and living occupant, was saved from destruction.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE LEGACY.

WHEN he had entered the channel-way, between the ragged reefs and the Bold Head Island, the boy felt that he was safe, and his face blushed with pride at his success.

But he held rapidly on before the wind until he ran into the cove, where his little boat had been, when he stood upon the cliff.

Here he beached his skiff, and hauled the life-boat ashore on the sand.

Then he turned his attention to caring for the one whom he had rescued.

The boy started, as he beheld the dead form of the beautiful girl lying in the life-boat, which was one third full of water.

The girl looked strangely life-like as she lay there, her arms folded peacefully across her breast, and there at her head half reclined the man, his body supported by the stern seat, his head resting upon the gunwale.

"You have saved me, and only to see me die," he said, faintly.

"No, indeed, sir; for I've got my dinner here, which I have not eaten, and there's a spring yonder in the pines, and it's just what you want," said the lad, cheerily.

"Ah, my boy, I feel that I cannot live, and must follow poor Vesta."

"She is dead, sir?" inquiringly said the boy, as he gazed in awe upon the beautiful face.

"Yes," and the man could hardly articulate the word. So the boy ran to the spring with a gourd, and brought it back full of cold water.

Eagerly the man drank it, and it seemed he would never quench his thirst; but the lad restrained him, and said:

"You must not drink too much now, sir; but I have something here for you to eat."

But he waved away the food, and said, faintly:

"Too late!" Then he took from his pocket a key, and said, speaking evidently with the utmost difficulty:

"My boy, you are a brave lad, and risked your life to save mine. Do you live near here?"

"Two leagues away, sir, up the coast."

"Who are you?"

"A fisher lad."

"One above his calling, I should say."

"My father is a gentleman, sir, and was once rich; but we are very poor now."

"I am very glad I can help you, my boy; but will you do me a great favor?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have here a watch, ring, and scarf-pin, and you see upon the breast of this poor dead child a brooch, while upon her wrist is a bracelet, on her finger a ring."

"Take them and mine, when I am dead, and keep them for the hands of one person only."

"Write to him and tell him that I married the woman I loved, and gave up title, wealth—all for her."

"Tell him we shipped upon a brig bound for America, and she went down, and you saved us, her dead body and my living one from being dashed to pieces upon the rocks."

"You can write, can you not?"

"Yes, sir; but I hope to be able to go to school and learn more."

"Well, write to this address, and tell him how I died, and where I am buried, for you must bury me and poor Vesta."

"Tell him you hold in your keeping my watch and other things, and her jewelry, and will give it to his authorized agent for receiving them."

"Tell him to give to Molsey, the Gypsy Queen, my wife's mother, the jewelry that belonged to Vesta, and tell her of our fate."

"Then will we rest content in our graves."

"Now, my lad, in this carpet-sack are papers also for my brother's hand, and you will find his name and address here."

"Also there is gold here, one thousand pounds, and some silver."

"This is yours."

"Oh, no!"

"Nay, I mean what I say, for it is yours, my legacy to you, and it is mine to give."

"He to whom I write gains much by my death, and is rich, and I am more than happy in being able to help you."

"But, sir, you may not die."

"Ah, my lad, I have no desire to live now, and so do not have pluck enough to hold on to life."

"I am dying as I talk to you, and shall slip life's cable as calmly as did my beautiful Vesta."

"Remember what I have told you."

"I will not forget, sir."

"And stay by me until I am dead."

"I will not leave you, sir," said the brave boy, his eyes filled with tears, and then he added:

"It's only a few leagues inland, sir, to where the doctor lives, and I could go and fetch him, and perhaps he would save you."

"No, my boy, nothing would save me now, for I am doomed."

"What is your name?"

"Ned, sir."

"Ned what?"

"My real name is Edward Everard, sir; but they call me Ned and Fisher Boy Ned."

"You promise then to obey my dying injunction, Edward Everard?"

"I do, sir."

"Upon it much depends, my lad, and I believe I can trust you, so die with no dread you will deceive me."

"Here, Edward, give me your hand and hold mine until I die; it will not be long that you will feel my pulse beating, for I feel that the end soon must come."

The boy sat down on the gunwale of the boat, and grasped the hand of the dying man.

The eyes of the man closed, his breathing became labored, and the poor boy, passing through a dread ordeal, did not move from his position.

The shadows deepened upon the sea and land, the sun broke through a rift of clouds in the west and tinged the waters with a rosy light, as it touched the horizon, and the boy took it as a good omen, for superstition ran rampant in those days.

But, as his eyes fell upon the sea, glowing under the warm touches of the setting sun, a whisper broke through the parched lips of the dying man; but it reached the ears of the boy, and it was:

"Good-by!" Then the hand slipped from the grasp of Ned Everard, and he was alone with the dead.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GRAVES BY THE SEA.

WHEN Ned saw that the man was dead, the tears dropped from his eyes in sorrow, for he had a tender heart, brave as he was.

Then he spread a blanket over the two forms, placing the man by the side of his wife in the life-boat, which he hauled off from the shore and anchored, where it would be safe from any wild beast.

Taking his rifle and game then in his skiff, he started for home by water, for the sea was running down and the fierce gale had blown it self out.

Still the ocean was wild enough to appall a heart less fearless than his from risking it, and night was now upon land and sea.

Running along under the lee of the island for awhile, he then boldly sailed out into the wild waters, but the tide having begun to run out, there was no danger of his being swept irresistibly upon the rocky coast and dashed to pieces.

There was an island here, an ugly rock there, and ragged reefs raised their threatening tops on every side; but Ned Everard seemed to know the waters thoroughly, and avoiding every peril, after a run of a couple of hours, rounded a bold headland and ran into a little basin that was so well sheltered that it was as calm as a mill-pond.

Upon the hillside above where he ran his skiff ashore upon the sands a light glimmered, and, taking his game, rifle and the carpet-bag, he made his way up the steep path to a small cabin of but three rooms.

A dog growled as he approached, but recognizing him, came bounding to his side.

"Ah, yes! you smell fresh meat, Tiger; but I've got something better than game in this bag," said Ned.

Just then the door of the cabin was thrown open, and a woman appeared.

"Is it Ned, Tiger?" she called out to the dog, trying to penetrate the darkness as she spoke.

"Yes, mother, I am home again, though I came pretty near staying away all night," answered the boy.

"It stormed so this afternoon that we were anxious about you, fearing you would attempt to round Bald Head Point in the storm," said the woman, who was a ladylike-looking person of thirty-five, dressed in homespun, and with a face full of character and gentleness.

"I did more than that, mother, as I will tell you," replied the boy, entering the cabin and handing her the game as he spoke, while he placed the carpet-sack upon the floor.

"My son, have you company with you?" asked a man, who was seated in an easy-chair near the large chimney, and whose leg was resting upon a box, and splintered and bandaged as though broken.

"No, father, I have no company, but I have had, and I wish you to listen to me—you and mother—while I tell you a strange story."

And the boy sat down near his father, while his mother laid aside the game and came back to his side, for something in his manner and words impressed her with the feeling that he had indeed something of importance to tell them.

With the deepest interest the mother and father listened to the story of Ned, and when he had told all, they discussed the matter over in all of its details.

At last Mrs. Everard said:

"Ned, you will have to go to the town tomorrow, tell your story, and give up the papers and money."

"No, mother, I will do as I pledged I would to that poor man," said the boy, firmly.

"You will certainly let the judge know, for you will get into trouble if you do not."

"No, wife, I see no reason why others than ourselves should know of this matter, for I know well old Judge Wynan's trickery, and he would appropriate the money and then ask a reward for showing where the bodies were to those who had a right to claim them."

"Ned is right, and these bodies must be looked upon as merely drifting ashore; and Ned can go at dawn, take a pick and shovel, and bury them decently. I only wish I could be of some use, my poor boy."

"I will go with you, my son, and help you all I can, while I will take my English Book of Prayer and read over them the burial service."

"That is right, wife, and you can find a secluded burial-place, where no one will find the graves, and Ned can simply say that he found their boat adrift, which will be the truth."

"Then, Ned, I will tell you what you will have to do."

"Yes, father."

"Go to England."

"Oh, father!"

"Husband!"

"It will be better than writing."

"He can go to England, take the jewelry, and tell all that happened, and that the dying man gave to him the gold."

"We can get along, wife, for we can live on some of Ned's money, and I am getting able now to hobble about, and can fish and help you some."

"Now let us look over the contents of the carpet-bag."

There were papers therein of an important character.

Some clothing marked with a crest, a few trinkets, the jewelry worn by the dead man and his wife, a thousand pounds in gold, some bank-notes, and half a hundred dollars in silver.

It was a fortune in those days, and the poor boy was as happy at his treasure as could be.

"You will have to count this, Ned, and see just what you received, so as to be able to tell those to whom you go to tell your story."

"But, father, when shall I go?" asked Ned, delighted at the prospect of a sea voyage.

"My old friend Captain Samuels sails on the clipper ship Dreadnaught in about a week, and goes to London, so you had better go with him, and he will take good care of you."

"I shall work my way across, sir, for it will give me a good training on a large vessel, sir," said the plucky boy.

"Well, Samuels will let you do so, I am sure."

"And I shall come back in a brig, sir, so as to learn the different kinds of vessels, as you said, father, you would trust me to handle a schooner and a sloop now."

"Indeed, I would, my boy, and your voyage will help you greatly; but now you must go to bed, for you will be up bright and early in the morning."

So Ned retired to his little room, and was soon fast asleep; but he was up bright and early, and, accompanied by his mother, set sail for the little cove where he had left the life-boat with its dead crew.

He found all as he had left it, and a secluded spot was found up a picturesque glen, back a few rods from the sea, and Ned dug a double grave.

Into it the unfortunate couple were placed, and above them Mrs. Everard read the service for the dead, after which the boy filled in the grave, spreading over it a quantity of fine straw, and marking the spot simply by a broken oar-blade.

Then they returned home, towing the life-boat, and the next day Ned went up to the town to engage a berth upon the packet schooner running to Boston, whence he was to take the Dreadnaught, clipper ship, for London.

Ned also wished to make a few purchases for himself, of a new outfit and some things for his mother, at the same time asking a boy friend of his to run down each week to see his parents during his absence, and to take his place as much as possible during his stay away.

Bright-hearted was Ned when he entered the little village, having run there in his skiff, but it was with a heavy heart, several hours after, that he left it upon his return home, and why the change in his spirits the next chapter will disclose.

CHAPTER VII.

NEPTUNE NED.

THERE was, in the village to which Ned Everard had gone, a desperate character by the name of Carl Brewer, but more generally known as Neptune, on account of his long gray beard and hair.

The man was a desperado of the worst type and though white-haired and bearded, was not over forty.

Possessing a large, powerful frame, and an ugly temper, he was feared by all as one to shun a difficulty with, and the villagers were glad when he went away on a voyage, which he did

when his money gave out and he could no longer get credit.

He was an Englishman, and had come to the little seaport as mate of a vessel that put in there in a crippled condition.

Finding that the craft would take some weeks to repair, Carl Brewer left the work for the crew to do and went on a spree.

The result was that the captain sailed without him one night, and since then the mate had made the village his home, going off on a cruise when he had no money, and upon his return boarding at the best inn and keeping up his dissipation while he had a dollar left.

He had been captain of a coaster, mate, and foremast hand, and at one time had disappeared for several years; but, just as the villagers began to congratulate themselves on having gotten rid of him, he turned up with plenty of gold, while, to the surprise of all, his black hair and beard had become white as snow.

One day in the village he had come face to face with Skipper Everard, and the two seemed to recognize each other at a glance, while Neptune, as the desperado was called, gave a cry of rage and rushed upon the man before him, drawing a knife as he did so.

Skipper Everard was then mate of a little trading-sloop running to Boston, but he was known to be a quiet man, very much of a gentleman in his manners, and one who had without doubt seen better days.

As Neptune rushed upon him, he drew back and warned him off; but the infuriated man, recognizing in him one against whom he had an old feud, heeded not the warning and sprung to the attack, his long-bladed knife raised for a fatal blow.

Then came the crack of a pistol, and Neptune dropped in his tracks.

He was not killed, but lay for several months at the inn, hovering between life and death; but at last he recovered and went to sea.

A year or more he had been absent, and then he returned one day, and, as was his wont, put up at the Anchor Inn.

He had asked about Skipper Everard, and openly threatened that the feud between them should be settled before he again went to sea.

Seated out on the piazza of the Inn, treating a number of village idlers to rum, his eyes fell upon Ned Everard as he approached, and he asked:

"Whose brat is that?"

"That's Skipper Everard's boy," answered one.

"I would have known it from his looks, for he resembles his mother immensely," and the man's face wore a wicked look as his eyes followed Ned who passed the inn and went on to the store.

Having completed his purchases, rigged himself out with a new belt and sailor's knife, Ned carried all down to his boat, and then returned to the inn to see the captain of the packet-schooner that was to sail the next afternoon.

"Say, boy, are you the son of Ellen Vance?" gruffly called out Neptune as Ned passed near.

"My mother's name was Ellen Vance, but she is now Mrs. Everard," answered Ned, who knew who the desperado was.

"And Louis Everard is your father?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I hate them both, and I shall thrash you for their sakes," and the man suddenly stretched out his hand, and, without rising from his chair, dragged the boy toward him.

"Release, me, sir," cried Ned with anger, while none of the crowd dared remonstrate.

"I will release you, you young rascal, when I have marked you as I wish, for I'll clip your ears, and you can go home and tell your parents that Carl Brewer did it."

"Don't you dare do it!" cried Ned, as the man held him with one hand while he put the other to his belt for his knife.

"I shall clip your ears, boy, and then kill your father, for I guess that will bring him to town."

As he spoke, his face was white with wickedness, and he arose to carry out his savage threat.

But suddenly there was heard a warning cry, and the desperado gave a cry of anguish, as Ned sprang from his grasp and staggered backward, his hand grasping the sailor knife he had just bought, and which he had driven to the hilt in the side of the huge villain.

A moment did Neptune stand, swaying to and fro, and then he sprung toward the boy crying:

"You have killed me, boy, but you shall die too!"

But Ned sprang nimbly to one side and the bully staggered and fell his full length upon the piazza of the inn.

"Oh, sir, is he dead?" cried Ned in great distress, as the landlord bent over him.

"He is dead, Ned, and you did but right, for he meant to cut your ears off; I saw it in his devilish look that he meant it."

"Go, my boy, go home, and tell your parents that not one here will say you did other than right," said the landlord.

"Ay did you, my boy," cried one.

"Did the boy not do right, lads?" asked another.

"That did he! Three cheers for Neptune Ned!" a voice cried, and the score of men about gave three rousing cheers.

But Ned's eyes were full of tears and he walked slowly away, engaged his berth on the schooner, told the captain he would board her as she ran out of the river, and then went to his boat, his heart full of conflicting emotions, for it was a sad blow to the boy to take human life, even in self-defense.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DISCARDED LOVER.

IT was nearly sunset when "Neptune Ned"—as he had been called, after he killed the huge sailor desperado, "Neptune"—arrived at home, and he was in a quandary how to tell his parents just what had occurred.

But he knew that it must be done, and so, after having exhibited his purchases, he said:

"Father, do you remember the huge sailor you shot once, and whom they call Neptune?"

Skipper Everard glanced quickly at the boy, and then at his wife, while he answered:

"Yes, my son."

"Is he again in the village, Ned?" asked his mother anxiously.

"Yes, mother, he returned several days ago."

"Then he will not rest, Louis, until he has taken your life," and Mrs. Everard turned white with dread.

"Father, one night as I lay awake, after you had shot Neptune, I heard you and mother talking together, and both of you seemed to feel that the man would seek your life, if he recovered from the wound you had given him."

"Yes, my son, Carl Brewer is a desperate man, and I fear that it must be his life or mine; but I will not strike a meeting with him if it must come."

"You need have no more dread of him, father, for you will never see him again."

"What? has he gone to sea again?"

"No, sir."

"Then he has been killed in some drunken broil," eagerly said the skipper.

"He has been killed, father, but not in a drunken broil."

"Ha! some brave fellow has given him his just deserts."

"Tell me what you know about it all, Ned."

"Father, I killed Carl Brewer!"

Had a thunderbolt suddenly struck the little cabin it could not have startled the fisherman and his wife more than did the words of their son.

The skipper started, until the pain of his broken leg caused him to cry out, and thus Everard dropped into a chair as white as a ghost.

"You killed him?" gasped the mother.

"Yes, mother, and I feel very badly about it; but if I have saved father's life, it is better so; but he brought it upon himself, for he seized me in his strong grasp—see! my arm and neck are blue where he pinched me," and he rolled up his sleeve and drew down his shirt collar, showing the marks of the sailor's hand.

"Tell us of it, my son," said Louis Everard, and he gazed upon the boy with a look that was very unfathomable, for how could Ned have slain that giant desperado.

Then Ned told all that had occurred, and when he had finished his father said:

"My son, you did only your duty, for that man would have marked you for life, as he threatened, and you have but saved my life at his hands, or me from taking his life."

"You acted only in self-defense, and the justice will so acquit you; but let me tell you just who that man is."

"Once he was a man of honor and possessed riches, while he dwelt in England."

"He was your mother's cousin, for she, too, is English, and he loved her as such a man as he was capable of loving."

"I was then secretary to your mother's father, who was a naval officer, and Carl Brewer was a midshipman in the British Navy, but began to lead a wild and dissipated life that caused him to commit crime and have to leave England—though he wrote your mother and

told her that he would some day come back and claim her as his wife, for at first, with her father's consent, she had been engaged to him.

"Finding what a wicked man he was, your mother discarded him, telling him in her letter that she had really never loved him, and expected to become my wife."

"This letter Carl Brewer sent to your mother's father, who would not permit his daughter to marry his poor secretary, so dismissed me from his service and sent her to a convent."

"Thither I went for her, however, and she escaped from her place, became my wife and we fled to America."

"Fortune has not been kind to us, my son, for I have been able to give your mother but a poor home, as you know; but perhaps the future may be brighter for us all."

"I do not complain, husband, for I am happy, poor as we are, and now I can dismiss the dread of death at the hands of Carl Brewer, my wicked cousin, whom I have feared ever since your meeting him in the village, and who meant us harm, I know, for his nature was cruel and revengeful."

"Now that he is dead, however, we must see that he is buried, and I will send word by Ned to his kindred in England, that they may know his fate; and Louis, perhaps my father has forgiven me for running away with you, and all may yet be well."

"I hope so; and Ned can find out all when he visits England," answered the father, his thoughts going back to the past.

"I will do all that I can, father," replied the boy; and then the three talked over the matter, and it was decided that Mrs. Everard and Ned should go up to the village early in the morning, and that the latter should surrender himself to the judge for trial.

This was done; but it was so clearly a case of self-defense that Ned was at once honorably acquitted by the justice, with the remark that he had done the village a service in ridding it of so vile a character.

Then Mrs. Everard saw that the dead sailor was decently buried, his effects were given into her keeping by the judge, when she made known the kinship between them, and placing them in Ned's hands to take to England, as proof of Carl Brewer's death, the two returned home.

That afternoon at sunset the mother rowed out in the little skiff with her son, farewells were said, as he boarded the packet schooner, and Neptune Ned had started upon his mission to England, bearing the tidings of three deaths in the far-away land of America.

CHAPTER IX.

NEPTUNE NED'S MISSION.

MELTON MANOR-house was a grand old home, one of the grandest in England, with its numerous wings, towers and broad hallways.

Thousands of acres surrounded it, and its servants were counted by the score.

But a change had come over the old home, from what it was a year prior to the opening of this story.

Then the old lord and master had dwelt there, alone with his wife and his two sons.

One of them was an officer in the British Navy, and the other was a book-worm and devoted his days to study and quiet enjoyment of home life.

The latter was the heir to the title and estates, and while he remained at home with his parents the brother roamed the seas, a dashing, daring young sailor.

But a shadow fell upon Melton Manor-house, for the young noble, with no love for the fair maidens of his social position, turned his gaze upon one of a strange race, the fair young queen of a Gypsy tribe that had camped upon the broad acres of the nobleman's home.

He had been one day waylaid by two rough men, while strolling along the shore of the sea, and that his death would have followed if certain had not a maiden suddenly appeared upon the scene.

That maiden was Vesta, the Gypsy Queen, and such good service did she render that she saved the life of the young lord, who from that day became her slave.

He told his parents of his infatuation for the Gypsy girl, and it was said that his mother never recovered from the shock, that one of her race should love one of a wandering tribe.

Be that as it may, she certainly died soon after, and after seeing her laid away in her grave the young heir deliberately asked his father to allow him to marry the beautiful Vesta.

A scene followed, which ended in a threat to

send young Lord Melton to an asylum, and that night he fled from his home, carrying with him his bride, whom he wedded before his departure.

The old Queen of the Gypsies, Molsey, took the young couple to sea in the Melton yacht, to head off an America-bound vessel, as the reader has seen.

Finding that his son had fled, and with him the Gypsy Queen, the old noble was so infuriated that it brought on a disease, with which he had long been a sufferer, in its most virulent form, and he soon followed his wife to the grave.

Thus Melton Manor-house became closed, only a few faithful servants remaining there to await the return of its runaway heir.

It was to this deserted house that Neptune Ned wended his way one afternoon, going on foot along a green lane that wound toward the old mansion.

He had taken passage from Boston on the clipper ship Dreadnaught, and arrived safely in London, where his inquiries had directed him how to find Melton Manor-house.

As he reached the massive gateway leading into the ornamental grounds surrounding the handsome mansion, he beheld there an old man with gray hair, who was watching him.

"Is this Melton Manor-house, sir?" he asked, raising his cap politely.

"Yes, lad, and what do you want here?" was the reply.

"I wish to see Lord Melton, sir?"

"If you mean the old lord, my lad, he lies over yonder in his grave; if you mean the young master, he ran away with a Gypsy maid, and is wandering in foreign parts."

"I wished to see the elder gentleman, sir, for I came from the young master with messages to his father."

"Ah! so?" said the old man, with surprise.

"Yes, sir; but where is the brother of Lord Melton?"

"At sea in his vessel."

"And who is here that I can communicate with, sir?"

"I am the keeper, my lad."

"Then I will tell you why I am here, for I have come from America."

"I see, my lad, I see. Come up to my lodge with me, for I know you have news I will be glad to hear, as I don't like to see the old home so dreary as now, and will be glad to see its open doors once more, even if we have to acknowledge a Gypsy Queen as my lady."

And the old keeper led the way to the mansion, where he soon learned all that had happened, and he said quickly:

"Then Lieutenant Cecil Hammond is now Lord of Melton, seeing as how poor Master Loyd is dead."

"Well, he's a fine fellow, is he, and I guess he'll give up following the sea and come home and enjoy himself."

"But we must go to the city to-morrow, lad, and make all known to the master's attorney."

"But I wish also to see the old Gypsy woman, Molsey."

"She has no right here now, lad."

"I have a promise to keep to the poor gentleman who died, and I must do so."

"You are a good lad, I say, and I'll tell you what I'll do."

"The Gypsy camp is down the shore a couple of leagues, they having just come back to the neighborhood after their wanderings, and I will drive you there in my cart, so you can see her, and we can get back by nightfall."

"I will thank you, sir, if you will take me there," answered Neptune Ned, and half an hour after the two were in a small cart going through the forest to the camp of old Molsey, the Gypsy.

CHAPTER X.

NEPTUNE NED'S PLEDGE KEPT.

THE Gypsy camp was situated in a most picturesque spot, in the midst of a vast woodland bordering upon the sea.

There were fully two-score tents and wagons, and nearly two hundred of these dusky children of the forest, and the eyes of all rested upon the old keeper and Neptune Ned as they drove up.

"What is wanted?" asked a brawny fellow, addressing the keeper.

"This lad wishes to see your queen."

"I will see if she will speak with him," and the fellow disappeared, to soon return and state that Molsey declined to speak with any one.

"Tell her that I come from her daughter," said Neptune Ned.

The man started and said:

"From Lady Melton?"

"Yes," the keeper answered, willing to humor him.

The man departed, and soon called to Neptune Ned to approach.

The keeper would have gone, too, but was told to remain where he was, and Ned was led to a large red tent some distance away.

Within it, lying upon a cot, was Molsey, the one who had run the yacht out to the brig, and whom the sailors had said had "queered" the vessel, giving them ill-omen.

"You would see me, boy?" she asked in a harsh voice, motioning for the man to depart.

"Yes, madam," and Ned, with innate politeness, removed his cap.

"Who is it you would see?" asked the woman in a tone of some suspicion.

"Molsey, the Gypsy Queen."

"I am Molsey, and Roderick said that you came from my child, the Lady Melton?"

"I came to England with messages from Lord Melton to his brother and to you."

"And sent my child no word to me?" sharply asked the woman.

Ned hardly knew what to say, but after an instant of hesitation answered:

"I am sorry to say that I bear to you only bad news."

The woman sprung to her feet and asked hoarsely:

"Boy, does my child live?"

"No, madam, she is dead."

"And Lord Melton?"

"Is also dead."

She sunk down upon her knees, bent her face to the earth, and thus remained for some moments.

At last she said calmly, as she arose:

"Tell me all you have to tell."

In his own way Neptune Ned told the story of the shipwreck, and his finding the boat drifting ashore, and how he went to its rescue only to see Lord Melton die soon after.

He gave the old Gypsy Queen the jewelry he had which had belonged to poor Vesta, and told her how he had with his mother buried the two side by side.

"My child is gone, and it is because I allowed her to wed with one who was not of our people."

"She loved him and he loved her: but the Gypsy laws must not be broken, and bitterly am I punished."

"My boy, I thank you for all that you have done, and I would bestow upon you gold for your trouble," said the old woman.

"No, no indeed, not a piece of gold will I touch," cried Ned.

"Here, then, take this necklace of golden links, and let me clasp it about your neck."

"Wear it, for it will bring you good-fortune; but the day you pledge your love to woman, take it from your neck and place it about hers, and only luck can ever attend you both—farewell."

She clasped a necklace of solid gold links about Ned's neck, as she spoke, and he, seeing that the woman would have it so, made no resistance.

Then he bade her farewell, while she raised his hands, one after the other, to her lips, saying:

"Let me kiss the hands that buried my child—farewell!"

Ned then departed from the tent, while suddenly arose behind him the quick sounding of a tocsin.

It rolled through the camp, and as its sounds reached the ears of the dusky people a wail of anguish arose.

Then all counted the strokes, sounded by the old woman, and when one score had been struck, loud cries were heard on all sides, for that number told that Vesta the Gypsy Queen was dead.

"Come, lad, let us get away from this howling gang," cried the old keeper, in alarm, and whipping up his horse, they drove rapidly away from the Gypsy camp.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHASE.

As the guest of the good keeper of the home of the Meltons, Neptune Ned remained all night, and the next day set out upon his trip to visit the kindred of Carl Brewer, and make known his death.

The few effects left by the dead man Ned carried with him, and after some trouble found the homestead of his people and the stern father of his mother, who had become a commodore and retired from the sea.

In a few words Ned made known his errand, told the story of his parents' dwelling in Ameri-

ca, and how the hatred of Carl Brewer had in the end brought him to his death.

The commodore listened attentively, but was a man of little heart, and he heard the story without emotion, and said that Mrs. Everard had chosen her path in life, and was no longer kindred of those she had left in England, while he had cast her off at the time of her marriage, and therefore did not longer regard her as daughter of his.

"My mother asks no favors at your hands, sir, and I am not here as a beggar!"

"But for the fact that I had to make known to you, as his former guardian, the death of Carl Brewer, I would not have come," said Ned hotly, angered at the manner of the old commodore.

"Ah! you have that rebellious spirit of all Americans, I see, boy, and even beard me in my own home," replied the amazed old seaman.

"It is not my intention, sir, to be disrespectful to my grandfather, but I do not care to hear my mother referred to as though she had committed some crime."

"Give me a receipt, sir, please, for these things of Carl Brewer's, and I will depart at once."

"You have spirit, my boy, and if you will give up your home in America, yes, your parents, I will adopt you and get you a midshipman's berth in the British Navy."

"I thank you, sir, but I am an American boy, and I would not wish to enter the English service, while I love my parents too dearly to give them up," was the spirited reply.

"Well, you will go the way that Carl Brewer did, and some day be hanged, if you are not murdered for some act," hotly said the old commodore.

Ned's face flushed; but he made no reply, and bowing, left the room and the house.

Having accomplished his mission wholly, the boy returned to London; and after seeing the sights for a few days slipped in a trim brig bound to Jamaica, from whence he intended to re-ship for New York and thence home, for he was anxious to get all the sea experience that he could on board of large vessels, for his ambition was such that he had already made up his mind to command a ship some day.

Ned had shipped before the mast, but the mate had spoken to the captain of the brig about him, and after the brig was on her course, he called the boy aft, for he had watched his actions and observed that he attended to his work with alacrity and was as thorough as any experienced seaman.

"What is your name, my lad?" he asked.

"Ned, sir."

"You are not English?"

"No, sir, I am an American."

"Well, lad, I'll give you a softer berth than foremast-hand, so you can go in the cabin as cabin-boy."

"Please, sir, but I went over to England on an important business, and though I have the money to pay passage-way, preferred to go as seaman to learn all I could and wish you would let me remain forward, sir, as I can not become a sailor working as cabin-boy."

"Well said, lad; but as you are so anxious to learn, I'll tell you what I'll do."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll take you in the cabin with me and teach you all I can, and my mates will do the same, while you can help in different ways to pay for your passage."

"Oh, sir, you are very kind," said Ned, and he was at once installed in the cabin as a kind of supercargo.

The captain, mates and crew all took a fancy to him, and whenever there was work aloft or aloft to be done, Ned lent a ready hand, and showed a skill beyond his years.

The brig was a fleet sailer, some three hundred tons burden, and had a crew of twenty-three all told, with a broadside of two twelve-pounders, and a pivot stern chaser, an eighteen-pounder, to protect her in flight.

In those days pirates swept the seas, and a bright lookout was kept for any strange sail.

Ned was anxious to take his trick aloft, and one evening, just as the sun set, he called out:

"Sail, ho!"

"Whereaway, lad?" asked the captain, who was on deck.

"Almost dead ahead, sir, one half point off the starboard bow, and with no sail set."

"Ay, ay! and a schooner lying under bare poles to hide while we ran upon him."

"You have sharp eyes, lad, and have kept us out of trouble, for that fellow has an ugly look."

The brig was still heading directly for the

stranger, which could now be seen indistinctly ahead in the gathering darkness; but soon she was put sharper to the wind, and began to leave the schooner upon her starboard beam.

Instantly a change came over the schooner, for her masts were covered with canvas, and she at once started in chase of the brig.

"I knew that fellow meant mischief, and but for you, lad, we would have walked right upon him in the darkness that was gathering," and the captain turned to Ned, who was delighted at having discovered the stranger.

Sail was then crowded upon the brig, and it at once became a stern chase, the captain maneuvering so as to throw the pursuer as far astern as was possible.

But the schooner came swiftly along, and the two pretty vessels went flying over the dark waters under a stiff breeze.

After an hour's chase the moon rose out of the sea, and then it could be seen that the schooner was armed and crowded with men, while Ned observed:

"I have been watching her closely, sir, and she is gaining upon us steadily."

"You are right, lad, and the brig must be made to do better than she is doing, for I have no doubt but that fellow is a pirate, and these West Indian rovers are a merciless set!" and the captain gave orders to put on the brig every stitch of canvas that could be made to draw, while all else that could aid her speed was done.

But still the schooner slowly gained, and by dawn a bright flash broke from her bows, and a shot came tearing along after the flying brig, showing that the pursuer was in deadly earnest.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAPTURE.

WHEN the schooner had first started in chase of the brig, it was a trifle over a league distant; but through the night it had slowly gained, and by the dawn of day was not over half that distance off.

Then the schooner's commander concluded to try a shot, and sent a ball after the brig from his bow chaser.

It flew over the brig, showing that the pursuer was within good range.

"What flag does he show?" asked the captain, as the sun rose out of the sea and revealed the schooner quite distinctly.

"He has no flag up, sir," answered Ned, and a moment after he called out:

"He is sending up a flag now, sir, and it is a black one!"

"A pirate, as I thought; well, we have only to run for it and try to beat him off, though he has three times as many men," and the brave captain of the brig began to get his vessel ready for action.

In the mean time another shot was fired, and went to the side of the brig; but no attention was paid to it, and the stern pivot eighteen-pounder was cleared for action.

Neptune Ned watched these proceedings with deep interest, for he had never been under fire before, or seen a heavy gun manned, and he took in all that he could learn on the subject, with real boyish glee at the chance of having a battle with a sea rover.

Seeing that the brig's commander paid no attention to his demand to come to, the schooner began to fire more rapidly and aim for the chase.

"I did not think any craft could hound the Flying Fish as yonder fellow is doing, for she always shows a clean pair of heels to a pursuer," the captain of the brig remarked, and all seemed surprised that the schooner could gain on the brig.

"He is improving, sir, in his aim," said Ned, who had observed that each shot came closer and closer.

"You are right, lad, and he'll soon— Ha!" and the captain sprung to the side of his mate, who had been cut down by a solid shot from the schooner.

Ned had felt the windage of the ball, but had not moved from his position, though his face paled slightly when he saw the poor mate killed before his eyes.

"Poor Dorlon, he is done for," said the captain, and several seamen bore the mate below, while a second shot tore along the deck, wounding slightly two men with splinters.

"Hit him back, lads, and avenge poor Dorlon," shouted the captain, and the eighteen-pounder began to respond to the fire of the schooner.

The first shot flew wild, but a second was in line, and the third cut through the sails of the

schooner, showing that the range had been gotten by the gunner.

Then both schooner and brig fired rapidly, and it became a running fight, with the chances in favor of the former.

Once having begun to hit his foe, the schooner's commander dealt some heavy blows, his shot being aimed with an accuracy that was surprising.

The maintopmast of the brig was cut away, a solid shot buried itself in the foremast, a boat was cut from its davits, and two men had been added to the death list and half a dozen more were wounded.

"If we could only cripple him!" cried the brig's captain, and he began to fire the gun himself, while Ned sprung to the place of a man who had been shot down at his post.

"Bravo, lad! I wish I had a score more like you, in addition to my crew, and we'd beat that fellow off with ease," cried the captain, as he saw that Ned was a little giant at his work.

But now a well-aimed shot from the brig cut away the foretopmast of the schooner, and a second one splintered the bowsprit to atoms, and the former went up into the wind, while a shout arose from the gallant tars.

But it was a short-lived triumph, as the schooner, in wearing around, fired a broadside, and the pivot eighteen of the brig was dismounted, burying a couple of men under it.

"Keep her steady, helmsman, and we'll trust to our canvas now," cried the captain.

But with astonishing quickness, the schooner rigged another bowsprit and came bowling along once more in chase, her bow gun firing more viciously than ever.

Then a shot shattered the rudder-post, and the chase was ended; but not the fight, for the gallant old tar called to his men to man the small broadside guns and beat the enemy off, should they attempt to board.

Seeing that he had crippled his foe, it would have been supposed that the schooner's commander would cease firing; but, on the contrary, he kept up a vicious fire as he drew nearer, and luffing sharp, poured in a broadside.

"He intends to murder us, lads, so let us die game—fire!" yelled the captain, and the small guns of the brig opened upon the schooner.

But another broadside did fearful havoc on the brig, and four or five men went down, while the schooner drew nearer and nearer, still spitefully firing.

"Do you surrender that craft?" cried a voice on the schooner.

"I suppose I have to do so, if you spare our lives," was the answer.

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Then you will have to board and pull down my flag yourself and you'll find none but dead men to greet you," was the plucky response.

"I will spare you on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you step into the places of my men you have killed."

"I'll see you dead first," and the brig's plucky captain again gave the order to fire.

The discharge was a surprise on board the schooner, and did considerable damage; but a broadside quickly followed and the brig reeled under it, while her brave captain fell dead by the side of the gun he was again about to fire.

"Ho, the schooner!" yelled the mate.

"Ay, ay."

"We surrender on your terms."

"All right, haul down your flag and I'll send boats to board you," was the response, and the order was instantly obeyed, Neptune Ned wondering what would now become of him and if the pirates would massacre them all, as some of the crew suggested.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PIRATE'S PROTEGE.

THE conduct of Neptune Ned from his coming on board the brig, had won the highest admiration of all on board.

They had seen that though he was a boy he was a good sailor, and more, he was polite to all and won the regard and friendship of the men as well as the officers.

During the long chase he had been perfectly cool, and not even had he shown fear of death.

As the pirates lowered away two boats, while the brig lay to, and filled them with men, all of whom were armed to the teeth, the boy stood calmly watching them.

As they came over the side he saw that their leader was a young man of striking appearance, and yet one who looked as though his life had been spent in reckless dissipation.

"Who commands here?" he called out, as he

sprung on deck, his drawn cutlass in one hand, a pistol in the other.

And of the twenty-three men on board, eleven now alive remained unharmed, and one of the three was the second mate, who turned back among his men, not at all anxious to have the anger of the pirate leader turned upon him.

"Who commands here, I ask?" sternly demanded the pirate.

"You do, I guess."

The words came from Neptune Ned as he stepped forward and confronted the captor.

The pirate laughed, as did his men, while he said:

"I guess you are about right, lad; but where is your captain?"

"Dead."

"And your mate?"

"Dead."

Ned did not care to say more, as he saw that the second mate hung back to avoid notice.

"Well, they fought their ship well; but if some keen-eyed fellow had not seen me, under bare poles, lying in your course, I would have had no trouble, for you would have run upon me; who was your lookout?"

"I was."

"Ah! you have a bright eye, lad; but who are you?"

"My name is Ned."

"The captain's son?"

"No."

"A cabin-boy?"

"Not exactly."

"Supercargo, maybe?"

"So-called; but mostly a passenger willing to work his way over."

"Whither bound?"

"Jamaica."

"Out of where?"

"London."

"What cargo?"

"Merchandise."

"I've made a good haul."

"I guess so."

"And I will transfer your cargo, ship your men among mine, throw your dead and badly wounded overboard, and make you my especial protege."

"Me?"

"Yes, for I rather like you, my lad."

"It is more than I can say about you," said Neptune Ned, in a low tone.

The pirate then ordered the crew of the brig to go to his boat, telling them he would ship them as his own men, and the mate went with them, inwardly thanking Ned for not having betrayed him.

The boy started off with the rest, but the pirate said:

"I want you, lad."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know who I am?"

"A pirate, I guess."

"I am."

"I thought so."

"Why?"

"You chased us under a black flag."

"Where are you from?"

"America."

"You live there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"On the coast of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

"Ah! near Boston?"

"Near mouth of Kennebec."

"I see; you can be very useful to me, for you know something of the coast, doubtless?"

Ned made no reply, and the pirate continued:

"Did you ever hear of Redfern, the Rover?"

"Yes, sir."

"What have you heard of him?"

"That he was so cruel that he should be called Red Hand, the Devil."

"Ah! I am Redfern!"

Ned never winced, and the pirate smiled.

"Now, Ned—for you said such was your name—I wish you to go over the brig with me, show me where the captain keeps his valuables, and then we will return on board the schooner, and you will bunk in the cabin with me, for I've taken a fancy to you."

Ned was a boy of much nerve, as the reader has doubtless seen.

He was not one to stand in his own light, and he had heard much of the cruelty of the Rover Redfern.

He had heard it said that he had been a British middy and was a son of one of the colonial governors, but had, by dissipation and gambling, disgraced himself and been dismissed from the navy, after which he had taken to

piracy, and became one of the worst buccaneers afloat, with all vessels his prey and mercy toward none.

"If I don't make him mad I guess I'll get a chance to escape."

"If I make him mad I think he will chuck me overboard and we are a long way from land," was Ned's mental decision, and so he said:

"I'll show you the best I know, but I only sailed in the brig out of London."

"Well, the better you do for me, lad, the better it will be for you," was the reply, and the search of the brig's cabin was begun, while the men had already begun to get out of the hold all that was valuable and place it on deck, ready to take it off on the schooner.

The freight of the brig was a valuable one, and it was nearly nightfall before the transfer had been made, the schooner having been made fast alongside.

Ned watched the robbery with the deepest interest, saw the poor captain and his dead men thrown into the sea, and then the tears came into his eyes as he heard the order given to set the vessel on fire.

This was done, the schooner swung loose, and the flames rose brightly and swiftly from below.

Soon the vessel was a mass of fire, illuminating the darkening sea for miles around, and lighting up the path of the little schooner as she sailed away from the damage she had done.

"Now, lad, you are a pirate in spite of yourself, and you are just the one I want, so we will be the best of friends, if you do as I say; but if not, if you are treacherous and mean me harm, then you will find I can be as merciless as a serpent."

"So which will it be, war or friendship between us?" and the pirate held forth his hand.

"It will be friendship, sir," said Neptune Ned quietly, and he grasped the outstretched hand of Redfern the Rover in an eager way, though in his heart was a resolve that the forced friendship should soon end.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PIRATE IN SPITE OF HIMSELF.

HAD Neptune Ned sought the deck of the pirate schooner of Redfern the Rover simply to learn seamanship, he could not have found a better school.

It was "seamanship" all the time, the pirate officer, while cruising, not only keeping his vessel constantly under a pressure of canvas, but almost continually taking in and setting sail, maneuvering the craft in various ways, and doing all in his power to keep the crew from idleness.

He overhauled every vessel he saw that was not a cruiser, robbed them, set them on fire and went on his wicked career with, seemingly, a love of pillage and carnage.

Cruisers he "flirted with," so to speak, for he would run near them, fire upon them, and then sail away, fully conscious of his power to escape in his fleet schooner, and also risking the recklessness of daring them to chase him.

In this way several months passed and yet no opportunity of escape had presented itself to poor Ned.

He knew how anxious his mother and father would be regarding him, and yet he had no opportunity of communicating with them.

Redfern had boldly entered several ports, it was true, but the men he could trust watched those whom he could not, and there was no chance to escape.

Ned made the best of his situation, anxious to show that he was pleased with his lot, whatever he felt at heart.

He had won the confidence of the Rover, and more, he had made himself most useful to him.

Writing a good hand, and a fair scholar, he had gone over the accounts of the pirate, arranged his books, his divisions of spoils, and to his surprise found that Redfern was putting away his infamous earnings in investments in Havana and several other Gulf ports.

Every now and then Ned was presented with some handsome jewel, or a purse of gold, as his share of the plunder gained, and quietly put his piratical profits away until he could make his escape, always arguing that the value of the booty might some day be turned to good.

As though determined to keep his boy *protege*, Redfern told him he would some day make him his successor, after he had gained the fortune which he sought, and to teach him all he could was wont to place Ned in command of the schooner for a day and night at a time.

This suited the boy exactly, for by this he could learn to become a thorough sailor, and

get full practice in the duties on board a vessel-of-war, even though it floated the black flag.

Now and then when a storm was coming on Captain Redfern would turn to Ned and tell him to take command, and nothing daunted he did so, showing wonderful nerve and skill under most trying circumstances for one of his years.

Once in action with a small Spanish cruiser, which Redfern, being in ill humor, determined to fight to the death, he called upon Neptune Ned to handle the schooner, bring her into action, order the men to their guns and in fact do the entire work of a commander.

Ned obeyed, for he could do nothing else, and Redfern calmly smoked a cigar and eyed him, throwing out no look or word as a suggestion.

So masterly was the boy's management of the combat that several times the crew cheered him from the guns, and the Spanish cruiser, hardly a match for the pirate, was beaten off and turned to run.

"Now sink him!" yelled Redfern, furiously.

"No, Captain Redfern, I will not give the order to fire upon a beaten foe who is flying," said Ned, firmly.

"What! do you refuse?" yelled Redfern.

"You told me to take command and beat off the Spaniard, and I have done so, sir; but I will not order the men to fire on him when he is running."

Those who heard the bold words expected to see Ned shot down; but Captain Redfern laughed lightly and remarked:

"Ned, you have immense pluck; but don't show it again against my will."

Ned made no reply and the Spaniard escaped, wondering at the clemency of his foe.

But Ned had seen how cruel was the nature of Redfern the Rover, and how utterly merciless, and longed more and more to find some means of escape, while he hoped that the schooner could also be captured.

Among the crew who had been forced to join he knew that he had friends; but they were a mere handful, and he dared not attempt a mutiny, fearing others of the seamen, though many of them, like the brig's men, captives, would not uphold him.

The truth was Redfern paid his men most liberally, and this kept them true to him, or rather to their own sordid interests.

One night the schooner was cruising along the coast of Florida, the wind being so light as to barely move her through the waters.

Ned was on watch, and he saw the outline of a vessel ahead, and he was confident that it was an armed craft.

He meant not to make his discovery known, hoping they would run upon the stranger unseen, and thus be taken, as the vessel was a large brig-of-war, he saw as he eyed her through his glass.

Just then he saw Captain Redfern preparing to come on deck, and he knew well nothing would escape his keen eyes, so he called out:

"Sail ho!"

Then he added, calling to a seaman:

"Ask Captain Redfern to come on deck."

"I am here, my lad," and the captain joined him.

Ned was disappointed, but he did not wish to do one act to cause suspicion of himself, and thus prevent a chance of escape some day, so he said:

"There is a vessel dead in our course, sir, and I am sure she is armed."

"Right you are, lad, and it is the British cruiser, Scorpion, fleet as a greyhound, carrying double my weight in guns and in men."

"Helmsman, put her away straight for the shore, for there is an inlet we can hide in yonder," and while Redfern spoke he had been watching the stranger through his glass.

"Yes, I know that craft in the dark, and your sharp eyes saved our necks, Ned, for she is coming right along the coast toward us."

"Ho, men, strip the schooner of every stitch of canvas, get the boats out with muffled oars, and tow in."

This was a wise move on the part of Redfern, for his sails would soon have been seen.

Accustomed to quick work, the crew took in the canvas and lowered the boats almost without a sound, and the schooner was towed rapidly shoreward, while the stranger came slowly along, with just wind enough to keep steerage-way upon her.

CHAPTER XV.

BOARDING THE STRANGER.

As he neared the shore, Redfern could not but congratulate himself upon the timely discovery of his boy *protege*, for had the schooner

held on as she had been heading, she would soon have been under the heavy guns of the large brig-of-war, and escape would have been impossible.

"My boy, you have owl's eyes, and some day you will be a great commander," said Redfern, as he watched the brig coming slowly along.

"If we had our canvas up, she would see us now, but under bare poles, and with the forest-lined shores for a background, they cannot find us; while we can tow into a hiding-place in the lagoons, and wait until morning."

"The wind is leaving the brig, sir," said Ned, as he saw that a dead calm was coming.

"You are right, and she will be becalmed dangerously near us."

"But the dawn will bring a breeze and take us out of her way, I hope," and yet Redfern seemed anxious.

But the boats had now turned the schooner into an inlet, a search revealed a narrow lagoon and into this the vessel was hauled, her spars mingling with the branches of the trees.

"You take the first watch, Ned, and I'll relieve you at midnight, for we are in a most ticklish place."

"I'll send all the crew below decks, for I fear that some of them may escape, reach the shore and hail the becalmed brig, and I'll batten down the hatches, leaving only officers on duty tonight."

"Yes, sir," said Ned, and he gave orders for the crew to go below, which they did reluctantly, not liking the close confinement below decks in that warm latitude.

But they knew Redfern well, and dared not disobey, and soon but four men were on the deck of the schooner, Ned and three officers, the captain having gone into his cabin.

"I'll be forward if you want me, Mr. Creal," said Ned to the first officer, and he walked to the forecastle.

The first officer was aft, and the other two were amidships, Ned being forward.

Hardly had he reached the forecastle when he went out on the long bowsprit, which projected into the trees on the banks.

Here he sat for a few minutes, and seeing that no one had observed him, he stepped off upon the branch of a tree and slowly descended to the ground.

Ned knew well his danger from reptiles and alligators; but he was determined to take all chances, and so made his way through the woods guided by the roar of the reef falling upon the beach.

He had brought with him two cork life buoys, and in his belt was his share of the pirate booty, so he had left nothing on board the schooner to regret.

At length he reached the shore, though a score of times he felt that he had trod upon a snake or some other loathsome reptile, but he had prepared for this by wrapping his legs with leather and clothes.

Arriving upon the beach he found that there was not a breath of air stirring.

The brig-of-war had dropped anchor and lay nearly a mile distant, and the tide was running out.

For some time Ned stood regarding the brig, dimly seen in the distance, and at last he said:

"I must try it if I lose my life."

He threw off the bandages about his legs, put his cork buoys about his waist, and drawing his cap down over his eyes calmly walked into the surf.

Here he paused, while he again regarded the brig.

"It is a long swim, but if I make it I can lead the boats against the schooner of Redfern the Rover hiding yonder in the lagoon.

"If I do not reach the brig-of-war then Redfern the pirate escapes and I will die in the sea," said Neptune Ned with the calm resolve of one who had determined to take desperate chances.

Then he sprung into the surf and struck out boldly for the brig-of-war.

He was a superb swimmer, with an endurance in the water that was wonderful; but unacquainted with the way the tide ran there, and the currents setting along the shore, he was not certain that he could reach the brig.

If he failed he knew there was no hope for him, and to save his strength, he had brought the two cork life buoys, which would readily uphold his weight.

The tide, as I have said, was running out, and Ned soon saw that he had to swim hard to keep it from bearing him past the brig at a long way off.

So he got down to long, powerful strokes and saw that he was edging nearer and nearer.

Thus half an hour passed, and the brig-of-war was yet a couple of cable lengths away.

But Ned struggled on, and he would not hail, determined to reach the vessel unaided if he could do so; if not, he knew he could hail, for he would doubtless be heard, and so he felt quite cheerful over his success.

As the buoys retarded his efforts he cast them aside, feeling ample confidence in his own powers to make the swim, and soon after was under the bows of the brig.

She was riding at a single anchor, and it did not take Ned long to mount over the bows.

Just as he did so, rising like his namesake Neptune from the sea, the negro cook of the forecastle mess happened to open his eyes, as he lay there asleep enjoying the balmy air.

The yell he gave startled the watch, while he darted aft with a speed that was wonderful for his fat body.

But he ran into the arms of an officer, who quickly brought him to his senses, and then turned to Ned, who had quickly followed the frightened negro.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, my man, but having swum off to the brig, I boarded over the bows," and the last part of his sentence was addressed to the officer, who asked, as he gazed in surprise upon the youth:

"Who are you?"

"Neptune Ned, my mates call me, sir, and I have come off to see your commander, for I have news for him."

"Are you the commander, sir?"

"No, I am the first lieutenant; but come with me," and he led Ned into the cabin.

The captain of the brig was a young man, and he had just retired for the night; but he hastily threw on his clothes and joined the lieutenant and Ned, the former saying:

"Captain Harvey, this is the youth, sir, and he says his name is Neptune Ned, and I guess he's right, for he boarded like old Neptune, and says he has news for you."

"I have, sir," and Ned saluted.

"Where are you from, my lad?"

"I left the deck of the pirate schooner of Redfern the Rover, not two hours ago, sir."

This assertion created an immediate interest, and Captain Harvey and his lieutenant listened most attentively to the youth's story, of his having gone to England on business for others, his capture on the brig, and since then being forced to be a pirate in spite of himself.

"I did not intend to report your sail, sir, when I sighted you, hoping we would come too near to escape; but seeing that Captain Redfern was coming on deck, I did so, as he would at once have discovered you, and then he put into the lagoon."

"When I saw that it was calm, I determined to swim out to you, and the schooner can be taken, though they may have discovered my escape, and be prepared for you."

"What force has Redfern?" asked Captain Harvey.

"Seventy-one men, sir, and fully half of them are really captives, forced to fight after being taken."

"If my absence is not discovered, the men are all below decks."

"There are four broadside guns on the schooner, twelve-pounders, with a pivot amidships, a thirty-two, and two more pivots of the same caliber, fore and aft."

"Lieutenant Norton, get out four boats, sir, and one hundred men, besides officers, carrying two boat howitzers, also."

"I will lead in my gig, and this young lad will go with me, and I think we can catch Redfern, while if we wait he may tow out before dawn, through some of the lagoons, so have all ready to start at once, and let the oars be muffed."

"Ay, ay, sir," and the lieutenant left the cabin, while Captain Harvey called his steward and ordered him to bring Ned a midshipman's suit and some supper, for the boy was chilled by his long swim and very hungry.

Half an hour after, Ned, looking very spry in his middy's rig, and feeling very comfortable after a hearty supper, went over the side into the captain's gig, and the boat expedition pulled off to attack the pirate schooner hiding in the lagoon.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FATE OF THE PIRATE SCHOONER.

HIDING away as the schooner was in the lagoon, and feeling assured that she had not been seen by the brig-of-war, the pirate officers did not feel the necessity for keeping strict watch.

They therefore made themselves as comfortable as possible, and went calmly to sleep, little dreaming that Neptune Ned had quietly slipped away upon his mission to reach the vessel at anchor off the coast.

When midnight came, from force of habit one of the lieutenants awoke and looked about him.

He did not strike "eight bells," not wishing to send any sound off over the waters to tell those on the brig that another vessel was near; but he looked about him, aroused his comrades and called to Ned.

No answer came and he walked forward.

But the boy was not to be found.

"He's turned in," gruffly said one.

"Well, the captain will quickly turn him out, I guess, for he told him to call him at twelve," and the pirate lieutenant walked aft and called for Captain Redfern, who responded promptly and soon after came on deck.

"Is the boy in the cabin, captain?" asked the officer.

"Neptune Ned?"

"Yes, sir."

"No."

"He is not on deck."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have an instant and thorough search made, for he must be here," and Captain Redfern was both excited and angry.

But the schooner was searched from fore to aft and without result.

"That boy has escaped, and if that brig does not sail before dawn he may signal her and betray us," the pirate chief said anxiously.

"I never thought you could trust him, sir," suggested the lieutenant.

"I did," was the laconic reply.

Then after a moment the captain said:

"Get up my gig's crew, Mr. Lorence, and I will row out into the inlet and see how matters are."

A few minutes after the gig left the schooner, and with muffled oars started out of the lagoon.

But hardly had it disappeared from sight when it reappeared fairly flying through the waters and then came the low orders:

"Ho, Lorence, get the men up and at the guns, for we are to be attacked."

At the same moment there came a volley of musketry from down the lagoon and the bullets pattered about the fleeing boat.

Instantly all was excitement on board the schooner, the hatches were thrown open, the men swarmed on deck, with imprecations and cries, and ran to their guns.

Captain Redfern had already boarded, and springing to the stern gun with his boat's crew hastily manned it, and aiming it himself fired upon the five dark objects coming up the lagoon.

The roar of the heavy gun awoke a thousand echoes, sent hundreds of birds shrieking from their roosts and caused the reptiles to spring from the banks into the dark waters near them.

The shot however struck between two of the boats, showered them with spray and went crashing through the forest.

"Curses upon me! I missed them!" yelled Captain Redfern, as he once more had the gun loaded to fire.

"Pull hard, men, and carry her by boarding!" cried a voice on the leading boat, and the boats sprung to the attack, while the broadside guns of the schooner were fired.

"They will not reach them, sir, as she now lies," cried an officer, and just then Redfern fired the stern pivot a second time.

The ball well aimed struck the gig, cries arose, and the crew were left struggling in the water.

"Don't mind us! pull for the schooner!" shouted the gallant young captain, who with Ned and several of his men, was in the water, while some who had been killed or wounded sunk from sight.

"Seize your muskets and give them a volley!"

"Then beat them off with pistols and cutlass!" shouted Redfern, and in obedience some scattering shots were fired.

But they did little harm, and seeing that the schooner was to be taken Redfern dashed into the cabin.

When he returned a moment after he held a large bundle in his arms, and bounded over the bulwarks upon the shore whither some of his men had already gone.

Others of the pirates were crying for quarter, that they surrendered, and the attacking force was upon them.

A few shots were fired as the gallant tars reached the deck, and the schooner was cap-

tured, though out of the cabin suddenly burst a vast flame and volumes of smoke.

"He has set her on fire!" cried the captain of the brig, who had, with the others, been picked up by one of the boats.

Ned dashed into the cabin, followed by half a dozen of the seamen; but instantly he rushed out, crying:

"To the boats, all, for he has fired the magazine!"

All was confusion for an instant, and pirates and British tars leaped from the burning schooner out upon the shore and into the boats, which hastily pulled away from the vessel.

And not a moment had they to lose, for the flames poured out of the cabin, the fated schooner rocked from side to side as the fiery serpents ran up the rigging, and then, with a crash and roar that shook the earth, the pretty outlaw craft was blown to atoms.

For an instant all was bright as day, and then came heavy thuds on land and water as the debris fell back again to earth, and intense darkness and silence reigned, broken suddenly by a mocking laugh from far away, and the words:

"Redfern the Rover still lives!"

To capture the daring pirate in that dense forest at night, the brig's captain knew was impossible, so he set about looking after the dead, wounded and prisoners, building fires along the shores to see just what to do.

The death roll and wounded list were both light, and about two-thirds of the pirate crew surrendered, all claiming to have been captives of the pirate chief, forced to serve him, and many of these Neptune Ned sustained in their stories, from what he had heard.

But, excepting the crew of the brig on which he had been captured, the others were ironed until they could be tried aboard the vessel-of-war, and the boats went back to their ship, the English captain determined to send parties ashore at daylight to search thoroughly for the pirate chief and those of his men who had escaped with him.

"We owe it to you, my lad, that the seas are rid of Redfern the Rover, for with no vessel he will be powerless—at least, for some time," said Captain Harvey, and Neptune Ned felt that he was fully repaid for his risk of life in escaping from the pirate schooner and swimming out to the Scorpion.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FLYING FISH.

"My lad, you have proven yourself well worthy of a middy's berth in the navy, and I'll see what can be done for you in time; but in the meanwhile you can serve on board the Scorpion," said Captain Harvey to Neptune Ned, the day following the destruction of the pirate schooner.

With the coming of the day parties had been landed to go in search of the pirate chief and his men who had escaped, and Ned had accompanied the party.

He saw that the schooner's boat, which had been lying alongside of the bank, astern of the vessel, was gone, and speaking of this fact to Captain Harvey, it was concluded that Redfern and his men had returned after the departure of the brig's crew and taken the boat, in which they made their escape.

The search of the land and numerous lagoons revealed nothing, and so the effort to find Redfern and his followers was given up.

Then the captain returned to his vessel, and it was when reaching the deck that he turned to Ned with the remark that opens this chapter.

Neptune Ned thanked the officer most warmly for his kind words, and told him he would be glad to serve as long as he was on the brig, but that his parents would be most anxious regarding him, and he would therefore have to return to his home and look after their welfare, and yet would hold himself ready for duty should he get the warrant of a midshipman, and hoped he would be ordered to serve under Captain Harvey himself.

For a month did Ned remain on the Scorpion, studying hard all the duties on board, from a cabin-boy to captain, and anxious to learn all that he could.

Then the Scorpion ran into a West Indian port, and the pirate crew, with few exceptions, were allowed to go, or ship on the brig, for Captain Harvey became convinced that those he had with him were in reality men whom Redfern, after capturing, had forced to serve him.

Bidding adieu to the gallant young commander of the Scorpion, Ned went on shore, and several days after shipped on board of a schooner bound for Baltimore.

Arriving there in safety he re-shipped in a

packet sloop for Boston, and there determined to make a purchase that he felt would please his father.

This was of a small, trim little craft which he saw was offered for sale, and which Neptune Ned had known as a coast trader, and one that was noted for her fleetness and sea-going qualities.

The little vessel registered not twenty tons, but the cabin was large and comfortable for carrying passengers, and Ned did not doubt but that his father and himself as captain and mate, with one man for crew and another for steward and cook could do a very good business running between the river towns and Boston, carrying passengers and freight.

So Ned invested his money from his piratical experience in the little craft, which was one of the style then known on the New England coast as a chebacca boat.

He had spoken to Captain Harvey about what he had received from Redfern, the Rover, asking him if it was honest for him to use it, and that officer had plainly told him that there was no way to return it to its owners, whoever they might be, and if given to a charitable object, as Neptune Ned had suggested, it still would be pirate gold, so that he had better invest it as he deemed best.

So Ned purchased with it the chebacca boat, which he rechristened the Flying Fish, not being satisfied with the name of Sally's Slipper, given her in honor of the daughter of her former skipper.

Looking about him for a crew, Neptune Ned secured the valuable services of a giant negro, who was not only a sailor, but a cook, and who could also play the violin and guitar, while he sung in what the boy considered the most delightful manner.

The "crew proper" consisted of a young man whom Ned knew as one from the village on the river, and who was a thorough seaman, though simple as a child, and called Simple Sam.

The ebony musician, sailor and cook was known as Charcoal, and was just the hue which had doubtless suggested the name.

With ample stores on board, a fair freight for the merchants of the village, and his crew at their posts, Neptune Ned sailed out of Boston Harbor as proud as it was possible for him to be, and enjoying the surprise he meant to give his parents in the purchase of the Flying Fish, while he knew it would delight their hearts to see him again at home after his long and perilous wanderings.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.

It was certainly a most lonely home that Neptune Ned had left behind him when he set sail for England, and his mother felt the full force of parting with her brave boy when she returned to her cabin and sat that night talking with her crippled husband.

"It is a long voyage for him to make, husband, and I am really sorry we let him go," she said, as she wiped a tear from her eye.

"Oh, Ned can look out for himself better than any boy of his years I ever saw."

"In fact, he is a better man to-day than half of those who call themselves so; but I hope he will get back before we have war."

"You really think, then, there will be war?" anxiously asked the woman.

"Yes, for it must come, as the colonies are worn out by England's course toward them."

"See how they are treated upon all sides, and our ports are but garrisons for British troops."

"You have become thoroughly American, husband," said the wife with a smile.

"Indeed I have, for I love this land of our adoption and her people, and I will go with them in the struggle, heart and soul, and Ned certainly is an arrant little rebel, and will make a name for himself if he gets the chance."

"Ah! what is there before us all? I dread to think of it," and Mrs. Everard's face became very sad at the thought of what might happen, for America was just then on the eve of the Revolutionary War.

A few days after Ned's departure, Mrs. Everard received a letter from him saying he was just about to leave port for England, and then came a long and anxious wait of months, when one day word came from him from London.

He had just arrived, and hastened to write, he said, that they might know that he was well.

He promised to write soon again, and sure enough a few weeks after they had a letter telling of his visit to Melton Manor-house, and to Molsey the Gypsy.

His visit to his mother's father he told as pleasantly as he could, not to wound her; but Mrs.

Everard felt that she was still unforgiven by her stern old parent; but she had cast her lot with Louis Everard, the man she loved, and she could feel no regret.

Ned's letter also stated that the feeling in England was most bitter against the colonies, and that it was hoped that the Americans might sound the tocsin of war, so that they would see how useless it was for them to begin a struggle against the mother country.

In his letter he spoke of coming back *via* the West Indies, that he might get all of the "deep sea" experience he could, and he knew that it would help him immensely as a sailor.

Then followed a long and weary wait of months, and no word came from the missing boy.

The parents talked over the usual runs made to the West Indian ports from London, and the time thence on to Boston, and they became alarmed as the weeks went by after the time, and no word came, and Ned still failed to appear.

Mr. Everard had become strong again, so he went about his daily work without pain from his leg, and his wife did all she could to aid him in fixing up the little home to make it cheerful for Ned's return.

But the faces of both began to look haggard, as the days passed into weeks, and their brave boy came not.

The long, cold winter went by, and with the coming of spring the parents began to fit up this cabin and have all ready for a welcome, for they would not allow each other to feel that they had almost given up hope of ever seeing Ned again.

The rumbling of the coming war was growing louder each day, and the colonists were wearing blank looks at the persecutions the British inflicted upon them.

The English Press Gangs were at work, taking fishermen from their boats and crews from their coasting vessels, to serve upon the British men-of-war, and the towns were swarming with Red-coats.

No actual hostilities had broken forth, but that there was surely to be a break soon, all knew, though the English did not think it would be more than a show of hostility, soon to be put down.

One afternoon Louis Everard and his wife sat upon the cliff, near their cabin home, looking seaward, as was often their wont, and talking over the prospects of war, while their thoughts were upon their absent son, whom they seldom spoke of now, so intense was their dread that he was dead.

Suddenly a deep boom down the coast startled them, and going to the point of the cliff, Louis Everard gazed in the direction from whence the sound came.

Again came the deep roar, and he said:

"That is a ship's gun, wife, but she cannot surely be in distress in this blow," and he gazed seaward where the waves were leaping about in chaotic confusion, tossed by a wind that was blowing strong.

"It looks like a storm yonder, Louis, and the vessel may be firing for a pilot, to get into a safe anchorage somewhere."

"Yes, we are to have a blow, that is certain, and a heavy one."

"I guess you are right; and that it is a signal from a British vessel-of-war for some coast pilot; but he is yonder behind that point of land, and we cannot see him— Ah! there goes another report; ay, and another, and another!"

"That is no signal firing, Ellen!" cried Louis Everard.

"No! see there!"

As Mrs. Everard spoke there suddenly shot into view, as though coming out of the rocky point of land itself, a small chebacca boat.

It was under full sail, though it blew a double-reef breeze, and was fairly foaming along the coast, while again came the deep boom of a heavy gun, and then another and another in quick succession, followed by a broadside.

"Oh Louis! what does it mean?" cried Mrs. Everard anxiously.

"It means that some British vessel-of-war is trying to capture or sink that gallant little craft, wife, that has just run through a channel to escape, that I did not believe but two persons living knew of, Ned and myself," was the slow response of Skipper Everard, and he stepped back to a large pine tree, where hung his glass and turned it upon the flying craft, just as another broadside was fired by the unseen vessel beyond the rocky point and a cry came from Mrs. Everard as the chebacca boat was seen to reel under it and her topmast fell from aloft, cut away by the shot.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RUN FOR LIFE.

The situation of this little craft, as seen by Louis Everard and his wife, was a dangerous one.

The point of land that concealed the vessel-of-war from their view, was a bold and rugged peninsula that rose into a lofty ridge, and formed the arm that sheltered a harborage beyond it.

It was over a league in length, covered with a hardy growth of trees, and though a quarter of a mile wide at some points, was very narrow at others, and here and there was split in twain by channels through from the haven inland to the open sea.

At low tide the peninsula was unbroken, but at a very high tide it was but a chain of half a dozen islands, the waters of the sea running over into the haven.

The arm of land was bent from the cliff, whereon stood the fisherman and his wife, and the haven beyond was therefore not visible to them, while their position was such that they could not see the passes through the ridge, and the little vessel had seemed to shoot boldly out of the land itself.

The waters into which it came were thick with islets and reefs, and certainly only a skilled pilot could make his way through them to the open sea a league beyond this miniature archipelago.

But the one at the helm of the little boat had evidently known full well, with the water at high tide, he could run through the ridge, and had done so, while whoever his pursuer was he had been furious at his escape and poured his broadsides upon him.

The last broadside had, as the reader has seen, cut away the topmast, and bringing the wreck on deck with a crash, it caused a momentary confusion, while the chebacca boat swept up into the wind.

"Oh! the boat is crippled and will be captured," cried Mrs. Everard anxiously.

"He is crippled, wife, but her crew are working like beavers, and I am sure have no idea of surrendering, for they are clearing the wreck very hastily and intend running again."

"But can they?"

"Oh, yes, for that shot only took off her topmast and cut some minor rigging, which will be quickly patched up; see! they are already getting her on her way again."

"Yes, and hark!"

Gun after gun pealed forth until nine were counted, and the shot flew thick and fast about the little craft, which was now dashing along once more upon her way.

"That British craft carries nine guns, anyhow, to a broadside," said Louis Everard.

"How do you know, Louis?"

"I counted them, and as they were fired singly she doubtless discharged them as she swung up for a broadside, upon discovering that the chebacca had not surrendered."

"You think they thought so?"

"Evidently, or they would have kept up their hot fire upon her; but see, the chebacca is fairly flying along toward the sea."

"And where going?"

"Perhaps for the river."

"It is a dangerous run for these waters."

"Dangerous indeed, wife."

"And she will have to gain an offing, round Bald Head and then run in for a harbor?"

"Yes."

"And the vessel-of-war?"

"Will have to run out of the harbor and travel along the coast, but will be a league astern of the chebacca."

"And cannot catch her?"

"I do not think so."

"I am so glad; but what can the chebacca have been doing?"

"Smuggling, I guess."

"Ah! and the British will hang her crew if taken?"

"Yes, Ellen, they make short work of the American smugglers; but I think I know that chebacca."

"Indeed! is it a river craft?"

"No, a coaster from the Penobscot that, called the Sally's Slipper, was sold by her skipper, I heard, and went to smuggling, though was soon after captured."

"Yet she is free now?"

"Yes, they have gotten her out in some way; but I heard when last up in town that she had been taken and was sold as a prize."

"Then I feel little sympathy with her crew, if they are smugglers."

"Except for their plucky escape— See, they are running for the offing, and will about reach

open water a league ahead of the cruiser, if the Englishman has run out of the harbor in chase."

"He doubtless has, for them cruisers hang on tenaciously when there is prize money to gain, I have heard."

"You are right, wife; but whoever is at the helm of that chebacca knows just what he is about."

"Those waters are most dangerous through which he is now running, Louis."

"So very dangerous, Ellen, you know we coasters call that rock-dotted bay the Devil's Net."

"I thought only a few people could pilot even a small boat through them?"

"It is true."

"And see how that chebacca flies along, avoiding every danger."

"That is what puzzles me, for she has some one at her helm who knows the Devil's Net better than I do, even, and who certainly knew he could run through the Blind Pass at this tide."

"I never saw a vessel go through there before, only you and Ned in your skiffs."

"No vessel has ever attempted it, though it cuts off a league coming here from the harbor beyond the ridge—Ha! there comes the cruiser, and she is a large brig-of-war," and far down the coast there suddenly shot into view a large and pretty vessel-of-war.

"She has run out of the harbor and is heading up the coast to catch the chebacca as he gains open water," said Everard.

"And can she do it?"

"Not if that skipper's nerve does not fail him."

"What can he do?"

"He can run back into the Devil's Net, and, with this half-gale blowing, the boats from the brig-of-war dare not follow him, while he can escape after nightfall back through the Blind Pass again."

"No! see, there is a boat."

"You are right, Ellen, the brig-of-war has left a boat filled with men to guard the pass, and she has come round to head him off and catch him in the Devil's Net."

"But can she?"

"The chebacca still holds on for open water; but the brig is carrying all the sail she dare with this wind, and will certainly get within close range before the chebacca can round Bald Head."

"And if he rounds Bald Head, he is safe?"

"Yes, wife, with the knowledge of these waters that her skipper has."

"How many men do you see on the chebacca boat?"

"I see but four."

"Would there not be more if she was a smuggler?"

"It would seem so; but we cannot tell, and if not a smuggler why is she running?"

"True; but may not she be running to save her crew from imprisonment on board the cruiser?"

"Yes, Ellen, that is true, and if so all my sympathies are for the little craft."

"Just so are mine."

"But see, Ellen, how she rounded the Porcupine Rock."

"I tell you, wife, the man at the helm of yonder chebacca knows the Devil's Net better than I do, and as well as—"

He paused, for he did not wish to bring up sad memories by reference to the absent boy.

But his wife sighed and said sadly:

"You meant Ned, husband?"

"Yes, Ellen."

"He indeed knew this coast as no one else does."

"It is true, for he had a knack of finding out dangers and remembering them."

"I have known Ned to go over a sheet of water, studded with dangers, several times only in his skiff, and then sail the smack over it without a break."

"I do hope in my heart that our poor, brave boy is not dead, Louis."

"God grant it, and I yet hope for his return; but see, wife, the brig-of-war is coming along at a slashing pace."

"And you fear will head the chebacca off before she can round Bald Head?"

"It does look so, I am afraid."

"And then?"

"The chebacca must run back into the Devil's Net."

"And cannot escape?"

"No, for with the wind off-shore as it is, the brig-of-war can anchor off the inlet to Devil's Net, and the boat in the Blind Pass can keep that place secure until to-morrow, when they

will send boats in and capture the chebacca, if her skipper does not burn her."

"That is why he struggles so hard to round Bald Head?"

"Yes, and is carrying sail enough to run him under."

"Can the brig see him yet?"

"Hardly yet awhile, but she will soon do so and I fear open on him."

"Is not that some one going up into the rigging on the chebacca?"

"Yes, it is one of the crew, and he is evidently trying to get a look over the point to see if he can find the brig."

"There are men up in the rigging of the brig, too."

"Yes, and they are looking for the chebacca."

"The boat at Blind Pass seems to have stopped there to stay, for the crew are all ashore."

"Yes, they know they must stay there to guard the pass should the brig not catch the chebacca in the offing and drive him back into the Devil's Net; but the weight of that man aloft in the little craft's rigging makes her lay over fearfully and he is coming down again."

"Ah! it is the helmsman himself, for he takes the helm, and, as near as I can make out, wife, the one who steered while he was aloft, is a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes, it certainly is a woman," and Skipper Everard gazed fixedly through his glass.

"And on board a smuggler?"

"I may be wrong about the craft being a smuggler, but I am sure it is the fleet little Sally's Slipper, for Ned and myself boarded her twice when she was becalmed off the coast here, and I know her well."

"She is the trimmest little coaster in these waters, and I am sure I am not mistaken; but the brig-of-war has now come into position where they can see the chebacca, for there goes a gun from her bows."

"And they will head her off from rounding Bald Head?"

"It looks so, Ellen."

"Is there no escape?"

"Yes, but a desperate one."

"What is that, Louis?"

"No, no, her skipper cannot know of it, for Ned told me only, I am sure, and I could not run a craft through."

"What is the secret, Louis?"

"You see how the waters sweep about Bald Head?"

"Yes."

"It is all chopped up by reefs, rocks and islands?"

"True."

"Would you believe a vessel could go through there?"

"No indeed."

"Well, you see the reef puts out from Bald Head for nearly a mile?"

"Yes, Louis."

"And to escape, the chebacca must round that reef at the Sentry Rock?"

"I know that."

"As he holds on and the brig now heads and sails, he would round Sentry Rock hardly a quarter of a mile ahead of the cruiser."

"Then he will be taken?"

"Sure, if he does not know the chebacca can run through right under the face of Bald Head."

"And it can?"

"There is water enough for a line-of-battle ship, but the passage is very narrow and dangerous, and could only be made with the wind from the quarter from whence it now blows."

"Heaven grant he knows of the passage under Bald Head!"

"I could hardly hope it, as it would be fatal if the helmsman lost his nerve, or made the slightest mistake."

"The brig has fired no more on the chebacca since that last shot."

"No, she feels sure of her game, and to cripple the chebacca where she is would be to destroy her upon the rocks."

"Oh! husband, the chebacca is going to round to and surrender!" suddenly cried Mrs. Everard.

For an instant Louis Everard gazed at the little vessel, and then he cried, excitedly:

"Not a bit of it! he has hauled his sail well aft, and is heading directly for the secret channel under Bald Head."

"Heaven have mercy on him! you see how wild are the waters there?"

"Yes, it is a desperate resolve he has taken, and may Heaven indeed have mercy upon him, for it is now life or death to him."

"If he finds he cannot make it, he can put back."

"No; he can only run on now, for with this breeze he can never go about among those rocks, and a moment more he will be into the narrow channel."

"If he makes it he escapes the brig, throwing her a league astern at least, and then he can escape under cover of the darkness; but if he fails, all on board must die in those wild waters," said Louis Everard, solemnly.

CHAPTER XX.

A DESPERATE CHANCE.

ALTHOUGH half convinced that the little vessel was a smuggler, striving to escape from the king's cruiser, the sympathies of both Louis Everard and his wife went out to it, so brave was the battle of the weak against the strong.

The position of the two craft were wholly under the eye of the fisherman and his wife from the cliff.

They could see the ridge-like peninsula, with the break in it through which the chebacca had passed from the bay beyond, and where were now the crew of the brig's boat, to prevent an escape back through that way.

They beheld the Devil's Net, dotted with its rocks, reefs and islet, through which the chebacca was flying to turn a rugged isle and head away for secure havens beyond along the coast.

Out in the open sea, rushing along under a tremendous pressure of canvas to reach the goal, and head off the chase, was the stately brig, a handsome craft and a rapid sailer.

The latter had about a mile to sail to the rugged point, and the chebacca boat about half that distance, and in those rough waters the former was going the faster.

But when Louis Everard had told his wife of the secret passage close around Bald Head's island cliff, he had suddenly seen the little vessel haul in her sails, for she had been running before the wind, and head directly for the channel which he had considered known only to himself and to Ned; in fact the boy alone knew its channel, though he had run his smack through there when his father was on board.

"Can it be possible that he knows of that secret channel?—if he does, he can escape, and if not, he goes to death," said Louis Everard.

"If he wrecks his vessel, is there no chance for him to escape, Louis?" anxiously asked Mrs. Everard.

"None in that wild sea about Bald Head, and he is daring indeed to run around it in so small a craft."

"May he not intend to run to the mainland, and beach his craft?"

"No, he is heading for the entrance to the secret channel."

"God be with him."

"I hope he may get through; but see how his vessel sways under the sail she carries."

"He should reef."

"No, the more sail there the better for him; but he approaches the entrance now, and if he rounds that huge rock, he knows what he is about; but if he holds on as he now heads, he is running at random."

Breathlessly the two now watched the little vessel, which was rushing like a pigeon in its flight, directly toward the huge rock referred to.

Then, as though its danger was not sufficiently desperate, the brig-of-war began again to open fire upon it, seeming to fear that the daring helmsman knew some way of escape.

Shot after shot flew about the chebacca boat, ahead of it, astern, over its deck, and one went through its huge mainsail.

But on its way it went, reached the rock, swept by, then off ran the heavy boom, and before the wind once more the chebacca drove, burying her bows far under the wild waters.

A shout burst from the lips of the fisherman as he saw this, and his wife gazed at him in amazement at his excitement, while he cried excitedly:

"Bravo! bravo! that helmsman knows the secret passage and means to use it."

"Bravo for him, whoever he be, Ellen."

Mrs. Everard was also carried away with delight at the daring act of the helmsman of the chebacca boat, and, with her husband continued to keep her eyes riveted upon its flight.

As though realizing that the skipper of the little craft knew what he was about, and how he could escape the brig, the commander of the latter vessel sent a broadside flying after the chase.

On all sides the iron shot fell, but without damage the chebacca flew on.

"He trims in his sail now; see! he rounds the Spear Head Rock and has the wind almost ahead."

"She works bravely into the teeth of the gale, and through that wild sea among the rocks—his decks are swept by huge waves—his hull is out of sight, Ellen, as you see, half the time, and now he rounds Turtle Back Rock, and takes the wind abeam, while he heads for that narrow passage you see between those two spots that look like fountains."

"They are reef ends, Ellen, and between them is a break with fifty feet of water; but you see he has but a narrow space, not thirty feet to run through."

"If he gets through he is safe; if the wild sea drags his boom under there, for he has got to let it off and go before the wind, he is lost, and if he loses his nerve and goes a point to either side, he is dashed to pieces."

"Now pray for him, Ellen, for he deserves your prayers, for braver man I never saw."

So did Louis Everard tell the story of the gantlet to be run, while his wife listened breathlessly to every word.

The narrow pass between the reef ends was now in the eyes of both, and the chebacca was approaching it as a race-horse might the goal.

The little craft was sailing almost parallel with the long reef, as marked by the surf-like wave breaking upon it, and to go through the pass must suddenly shove her helm to port, let her large boom run off, and dart away before the wind for the opening, which was frightfully narrow.

In a suspense that was terrible the fisherman and his wife stood gazing upon the scene, neither uttering a word, while the brig-of-war luffed up and lay to, firing no longer, as if her officers and crew were transfixed with admiration at the desperate pluck of the helmsman.

That they could see what the chebacca boat was aiming for was certain, and the pilot on board told them that the helmsman evidently knew some secret way through the reef, though he had never heard of one being there.

So all waited, watched, and held their breath in suspense.

Then they saw the huge mainsail swing off as the bows went round, and the craft head directly for the foaming caldron.

A moment the hull was lost to view, the mast swayed like a tree wrenched by the storm, the waters dashed in torrents nearly to the gaff, and then, rolling, staggering, plunging, lurching, the little vessel swept out into the open water beyond, while the gallant captain of the brig set his British tars the example, and three long, rousing cheers rung out for the pluck of the daring skipper of the chebacca boat.

In the moment of supreme peril Mrs. Everard had turned her eyes away, but a wild shout from her husband's lips told her that the helmsman had triumphed over death, and looking once more she saw the chebacca boat flying away through open waters, and heading for the haven near their home where Louis Everard's fishing-smack lay snugly at anchor.

By this bold deed the brig had been dropped far astern, and darkness was coming on, so that the safety of the chebacca boat was assured.

CHAPTER XXI. THE WRECK.

THERE is no doubt but that the reader has recognized in the chebacca boat the Flying Fish, and in her daring helmsman Neptune Ned; but to acquaint him with the facts of why the little vessel was chased by the brig I must go back to the night on which the young skipper sailed from Boston Bay for home.

He had not gotten far to sea before he discovered that he had two good sailors in Charcoal and Simple Sam, for they seemed more than anxious to do all in their power, and certainly felt proud of their little craft and young skipper.

As the craft was running briskly along, a few leagues off-shore, and under a seven-knot breeze, the keen eyes of Neptune Ned, who was at the tiller, detected something on the waters off the starboard bow.

It was not a sail he was certain, but looked like the hull of a vessel.

After glancing at it more closely he saw just what it was, and called out:

"Wreck ho!"

Charcoal was on his feet in an instant, while Simple Sam echoed the cry, having just been awakened from a very comfortable nap by Ned's call.

"That's a wreck, boys," said Ned.

"It are fer sure, Massa Ned," Charcoal rejoined, trying in vain to find what he had af-

firmed was a wreck, for to tease him Ned was looking off the port bow.

"It's a wreck, sart'in," chimed in Simple Sam, also looking for it.

"You are both right, for see, as we near it, it looms up, without a stick," and Ned now looked toward the wreck, which was only a quarter of a mile distant.

"You is right, sah, dere was a storm two night ago, and I guesses it hurt her."

"Yes, and there's another storm will break now afore daylight," asserted Simple Sam looking around at the skies, as he pretended, while he was searching the seas for the wreck.

Having discovered it he said:

"Goin' ter run alongside, Cap'n Ned?"

"Yes, for there may be some one on board—see! there waves a lantern now, and that proves there are people on board, and we must hurry to get them off, for as you say, Sam, there will be a storm and within a couple of hours too."

So Ned headed for the wreck and upon drawing near hailed:

"Ho the wreck!"

"Aho, the chebacca boat!" came back the answer in a deep voice.

"I will run under your lee, so stand by with a line!"

"Ay, ay, sir," and sail having been reduced on the Flying Fish, Neptune Ned went slowly up under the lee of the wreck.

It was a sloop, for her single mast was visible, broken off some six feet above the deck, and her bowsprit was also gone, while her bulwarks were badly stove in.

About thirty tons burden she was low in the water, and her skipper called out:

"We sprung a leak, after we were dismasted in the storm, and are settling fast; but I have a valuable cargo and will pay you well to deliver it in port for me."

"I do not care for pay, sir, to help one in distress, so let your men get it aboard as I have ample room, and we have but little time, as you see that storm rising."

"The cargo is light, my lad, and can soon be transferred; but where is your skipper?"

"I am skipper of this craft."

"You are the youngest captain I ever saw; but you look like a good one, and you saved us from going down, for we have no boat, and the wreck will sink within two hours."

Ned saw that the man was one who had evidently been well read, for he had the air, and used the language of a gentleman.

He was dressed in a sailor suit, wore a tar-paulin pulled low down over his eyes, and was armed with a pistol and knife in his belt.

There were six other men on the sloop, a large crew for so small a craft, and they were set to work to transfer the freight to the Flying Fish.

Ned was surprised to see that the freight was mostly in light bales, with an occasional box and cask.

"Them things has a suspicious kinder look, hain't they, Cap'n Ned?" said Simple Sam in a whisper.

"What do you think they look like, Sam?" asked Neptune Ned.

"Smuggled goods," was the reply, while a moment after Charcoal came aft and said:

"Massa Neptune, these folks may be honest, but them goods looks stolen."

Ned laughed and said:

"Well, boys, we have got nothing to do with the goods; we found the wreck sinking and will take her crew and freight to some port near for the poor skipper, though I admit the cargo looks too fine for a coaster to carry."

Just then the skipper of the wreck came up to Ned, and said politely:

"Young captain, I have a passenger for you, and am going to ask cabin room for her, for it is my little daughter of thirteen."

"She has been asleep, for we have had a hard time of it, and I only just awakened her—Oh! here she is—come here Bertie, and let me introduce you to our young rescuer," and a girl, well matured for her age, and very beautiful, as Ned saw by the lanterns' light, came aft.

"This is my daughter, Miss Bertie Buckner, young Captain—Captain—"

"My name is Ned Everard, sir," and Ned turned to the young girl, took her hand, and said:

"I am still more glad that I saw the wreck, now that I know there was more than barely sailors on board."

"You shall have the use of the cabin, so make yourself comfortable there, please."

"You are very good, and we all owe you our lives," was the reply in a sweet voice, and then the little maiden, dressed in a pretty costume suitable for a sea cruise, stood near Ned and

watched the men working in getting the cargo on board.

Calling to Tom and Charcoal to help, they too set to work, and soon had the sloop's freight safely stowed below decks on the Flying Fish, which at once swung away from the wreck, that was now settling fast, while the threatening storm was now near at hand.

"Where do you wish me to land you, captain?" asked Ned, as the Flying Fish, stripped to meet the gale and with the crew of the wreck standing by to be of service, headed off over the black waters.

"There is a little vessel at Portland which I can get, so if you will run me off that port, young captain, and lend me your boat to run in with my crew to get it, I will feel under deep obligations."

"Why shall I not run into Portland?" asked Ned, quietly.

"Oh, I won't put you to that trouble, though I will ask you to care for my daughter until my return with the vessel I go after."

"The fact is, I know of a little harbor on the coast where you can wait for me, and I will leave a couple of men on board to help you."

Ned did not need such help, but he did not say so, and was more than ever convinced that all was not right with the crew of the wreck.

Still he could not account for the presence of the young and beautiful girl on board the wreck, if it was a smuggler vessel.

So he determined to keep his eyes open and watch all that took place, at the same time showing no suspicion, and telling Sam and Charcoal not to do so either, of anything that he might think regarding them.

So deciding, he set to work to meet the storm, which now came howling along over the sea.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SMUGGLER'S DAUGHTER.

THE storm that broke upon the little Flying Fish was a severe one indeed, and the crew of the wrecked sloop at first seemed alarmed for the safety of the craft.

But they soon saw that she rode the waves like a cork, while the one who guided her destinies was a thorough sailor; in fact, Neptune won the utmost admiration of the men he had rescued, and they watched his handling of his vessel with delight as well as wonder.

Bertie Buckner, the daughter of the skipper of the wrecked sloop, also kept her eyes upon him, crouching near him in the cockpit, and refusing to go below either at the entreaty or command of her father.

But the storm, though fierce, was of short duration and soon swept over, and the Flying Fish held on her way once more.

After a rapid run she arrived at a small curve near Portland, just at sunset, and the skipper told Neptune Ned just where to find an anchorage.

"Do you not think we had best run into Portland?" asked Ned, who, during the stay of the strangers on board had become more and more convinced that they were a lawless set.

Still, as he had rescued them from death, and had promised to take them where they wished, he intended to do so.

"No, I do not care to take the chances of you being overhauled, and having my men impressed by the cruiser Restless, which we would have to pass to get in."

"She lies a league away yonder, and would surely bring us to, and my idea is to prevent this."

"Will she not stop your craft coming out, sir?"

"No, for I shall run out as a fishing smack."

Ned did not think this a satisfactory explanation, for there were plenty of fishing smacks then in ports on the coast that dared not attempt to come out; but he remained silent and the skipper continued:

"Besides, I can dodge the cruiser by running around into Casco Bay."

"Should I not return before dawn, wait for me of course, for I shall get back to-morrow night, or at the earliest moment," and calling his men together all but two of them took one of the two boats, with which the Flying Fish was provided, and moved away in the darkness, leaving the Chebacca securely anchored in a curve under the lee of a small island.

They had not been gone very long before one of the two men left on board of the strange crew came aft and said:

"Young skipper, my mate and me will take the boat and fish around here in the waters for a few hours."

"All right, my man," replied Ned quietly,

and in a short while the two men rowed away and disappeared in the darkness.

Charcoal was asleep forward, Simple Sam was near him, napping, and Ned was seated in the cockpit, alone, Bertie Buckner being in the cabin.

Presently she came on deck and sat down near Ned, while she asked:

"Have Rufe and Nick gone?"

"Yes, they went off to fish awhile."

The girl was quiet for a moment and then she said:

"Do you know what my father is?"

"A skipper."

"He is more than that."

"A very pleasant gentleman," said Ned with a smile.

The girl bowed her head while she uttered an impatient exclamation.

Then she said, after a silence of a few minutes:

"My father was born a gentleman; but he met with reverses some years ago, for I can remember when we had a pleasant home near Portland, and were happy, my father, my mother and myself."

"But mother died, and poor papa fell in with a bad set, and lost his money at the gaming-table."

"Then he went to sea, leaving me at school in Portland; but I heard a rumor that father had gone to the bad, and I determined to find out, and so told a sailor, who each month brought me letters and presents from him, that I would go back with him to see my father."

"He would not take me, so I just disguised myself as a boy and followed him."

"He took a skiff at the dock, and I got another, for our home was on the water and I am a pretty fair sailor."

"I kept his sail in sight and I found my father anchored in this very cove, on the sloop which was wrecked."

"I lay off yonder near the shore, and I heard enough to convince me that my father was the leader of outlaws."

"Then I came on board, and such a scene as there was."

"He stormed, the men wanted to kill me, and in his fury father killed the man I had followed, although he was not to blame."

"But I said I wished to remain, and so it was settled, I pretending to be content; but having in mind that I would some day get a chance to betray the sloop, on condition that my father should be set free."

"Now he has a valuable cargo of smuggled goods on your vessel, which he got from a ship at sea, which he was wont to meet at stated times."

"The night after we got them on board the storm wrecked us, and father has gone after another craft he knows of to still keep up his smuggling."

"Now, Captain Ned, you know just what we all are, and that I am a smuggler's daughter," and the pretty girl looked up innocently into the face of the boy, who was deeply impressed with her story.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE COUNCIL OF WAR.

"Now, Captain Ned, you don't think the worse of me for telling you the truth, do you?" asked Bertie, as Ned remained silent.

"No, indeed, Bertie, I think more of you; but I was thinking how hard it is for you."

"It is hard, Ned, to be the child of a bad man, hard indeed, and father's life of wrong and cruelty has lost him my love."

"Nay, I love him, but I do not love him as a daughter should, for I know he is so wicked; but I have made up my mind to go my way in life alone, and not let him again hear of me."

"What do you mean, Bertie?"

"I will go to the town of Boston and find some work to do, for I have a little money I have saved up, to keep me until I get work, for I can sew real well, Ned, and embroider."

"But do you not wish to capture this cargo of smuggled goods on board?"

"Why, what do you mean, Bertie?"

"It is as much yours as father's, and he has gone after a vessel to take it on board and then go on with his lawless work; but I will tell you a secret, Captain Ned, and leave it for you to decide what to do."

"Well, Bertie?"

"Where have them two men, Rufe and Nick, gone?"

"Fishing, they said."

"They have gone fishing for a prize."

"I do not get your meaning, Bertie."

"Well, I overheard father tell them he wished

them to remain on this vessel, when he and the others went up to the town."

"He told them also to keep a close watch on you, and your men; that you should make no excuse to leave the anchorage until his return."

"Then I heard Nick and Rufe talking together, and the latter suggested that the best thing for them to do would be to make a haul for themselves."

"Nick asked how, and Rufe said that they could go to the British cruiser and lead them here to seize this vessel, they getting well paid for it."

"So they agreed together that they would say they wished to take the boat and go fishing, and then row with all speed to the brig-of-war, which is not over a league distant, and there is just where they have gone."

Ned was surprised at this story, and most delighted that the plot had been overheard by Bertie.

He hardly knew what to say at first, for he was in a quandary, so he asked:

"Well, Bertie, what do you think it is best to do?"

"They will hold your men, and even you, on the cruiser, along with your vessel, even though they may not believe you a smuggler, after we have told our story."

"Yes, so it seems."

"What will be done with me, I do not know."

"Doubtless the brig's captain will send you to Portland to your friends."

"I have no friends, Ned, and as I said intended to look up work to support myself with, for I will not live under the care of my father."

"I suppose I can do nothing more than surrender the Flying Fish, for I do not wish to do any lawless act against the Government."

"Would it not do for you to go to the town authorities where your home is, and surrender your cargo to them, telling them how you came by it, and that you knew it was to be taken into port by the smugglers?"

Bertie, that is a splendid suggestion, and I will carry it out.

"I can run home and deliver the freight to the village officials, and that will free me of all blame."

"And poor me?" and Bertie spoke in a voice that trembled, for she felt her utter loneliness.

"I'll tell you, Bertie, what I will do with you."

"Well, Captain Ned?"

"I'll take you home with me and adopt you as my sister, and father and mother will be delighted to have you, and you will be so happy there, and mother will find you such a comfort to her when father and I am away from home, as we will be."

"Oh, Ned, do you mean it?"

"Indeed I do."

"But I am a smuggler's daughter, Ned, and your parents may—"

"You are not to be blamed for what your father has done, Bertie, so you go with me; but now I will call Charcoal and Sam, and tell them just what these two men have gone away to do, and what I shall do, and they are not to speak to any one at home as to who you are, for neighbors have cruel tongues sometimes, and it is best that they should know nothing about you, or your affairs."

"You are very kind, Ned, and I thank you," and she grasped the boy's hand warmly, while he called to his crew to come to him.

Then the force held a "council of war," as Ned called it, and it was decided to get up the anchor, set sail and run for home, leaving the cruiser and the smugglers to find them gone when she came, and to catch them if they could.

Half an hour after the Flying Fish was gliding swiftly along the coast; but when dawn broke, far astern was seen the brig-of-war, and that she had sighted them and was in hot chase, they quickly discovered.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FLIGHT.

WHEN Neptune Ned saw the brig-of-war in chase, he gazed at it long and earnestly through his glass, and felt convinced that it was indeed a cruiser, and that he was the object of her attention just then.

Under ordinary circumstances Ned would not have done ought to resist the laws of the land; but now he argued in his own mind that he had determined upon surrendering the rich smuggled cargo to the officials of the little town near which he lived, and therefore was doing right.

If taken by the brig he and his vessel might be held for an indefinite time, Charcoal and Sam might be imprisoned on board the cruiser, and

Bertie be sent ashore; if he escaped he would get the benefit of the prize money for the smuggled goods, save his vessel, his crew, and carry Bertie to his home, which he felt most anxious to do.

"I shall run for it, Bertie, and if I cannot escape, knowing this coast as I do, why, I deserve to lose my vessel," said Ned.

"The brig is very fast, I have heard father say," said Bertie.

"She may be; but so is the Flying Fish, though of course in this sea, and with the wind blowing free as it is, the brig will overhaul us rapidly."

"She's got all her clothes on, Massa Neptune," called out Charcoal.

"She has, indeed."

"She's comin' like a hound arter a rabbit," said Simple Sam.

"Well, we must do like a rabbit, and run into some hole," Ned answered, with a laugh.

Then he added:

"But let us dress the Fish up in all she will stand, boys, and hold our own until we can reach the bay this side of the Devil's Net, where we can run in and the brig dare not follow, for I do not think she can have an up-coast pilot on board."

So the Flying Fish was dressed up in her best for the occasion, and went rushing along in splendid style.

The sea was very rough, the wind very strong, and of course the large hull of the brig-of-war held the advantage under such circumstances and gained rapidly.

"Those two rascals brought the brig upon our anchorage and found us gone, so they will do all in their power to push the commander to catch us."

"She gains," said Bertie, somewhat anxiously.

"Oh, yes, she'll do that, and if we had no shelter would overhaul us before night; but I'll run into the bay I spoke of, and she can never follow unless she has a pilot on board."

And so the chase continued, the brig steadily gaining, until Ned darted into the entrance to the bay just as the brig was preparing to open fire upon the Flying Fish.

The entrance to the bay was island dotted and though there was ample water, without a pilot, and a good one too, a large vessel dared not run in, and Ned felt safe; but as he watched the brig and saw her come boldly in too, he said, quickly:

"She has a coast pilot on board, and we are in for it."

"You will surrender then?" anxiously asked Bertie.

"No, indeed!"

"We is catched, I guesses," said Simple Sam.

"We is done gone, sart'in," added Charcoal.

"No, if I can run through yonder arm of land," and Neptune Ned pointed to a ridge-like peninsula that put out from the mainland and formed the protecting arm of the bay.

"Is there a passage through there, Ned?"

"Yes, Bertie, with the tide full as it now is, we can run through what we call the Blind Pass, and have a couple of feet under our keel to spare; but at very low tide it is dry sometimes, and again only a skiff can go over."

"And you think we can do so?"

"I know it," was the confident response, and Ned gave orders to shorten sail, and headed for the peninsula, while the brig now began to open fire.

But, to the amazement of those on the cruiser the chebacca boat headed directly for what appeared to be a solid ridge of rock, and shot into a narrow pass out of sight.

"Now, Bertie, we are in the Devil's Net, and if we can round the reef points you see yonder, before the brig can run out of the bay and get there, we are all right."

"The brig will have to go back the way she came in?"

"Yes, but we have plenty to do to round the point before she can reach within easy range of us."

"And if you round the point, Ned?"

"There are half a hundred of places I can run into where she cannot follow us, for I know this coast well, and we'll get home to a late supper, sure."

"See there, Ned!" and the young girl pointed astern to the pass through which they had come.

"Yes, they have sent a boat there to guard the pass," said Ned, as he saw a boat appear in the channel-way.

"Why have they done that?"

"Doubtless the pilot has told them they can run around outside and cut us off before we can."

get out of the Devil's Net here and boats can be sent in to capture us."

"And there is no way that you can get out of what you call this Devil's Net, if you do not round the point of reefs before the brig heads you off."

"No—and yes, for there is one way, but a most desperate one."

"Well?" and though Bertie Buckner was perfectly calm, the girl was most anxious not to have the Flying Fish taken.

"You see that rugged cliff yonder?"

"Yes, Ned."

"You see how wild the waters are about it?"

"They are indeed most wild."

"Well, there is a narrow, a very narrow channel there which I can run through, though at a desperate risk, but rather than be taken I shall do it," was the firm response of Neptune Ned, and as he spoke the brig-of-war appeared in view once more.

CHAPTER XXV.

HOME AGAIN.

WIFE, I do not wish to raise your hopes to dash them down, but, as sure as I live, I feel convinced that yonder helmsman is our noble boy."

It was Louis Everard who spoke, and his voice trembled with excitement, while his wife was white with hope and suspense.

Mrs. Everard was a fair sailor, for she could handle a boat very well, and was a good oars-woman; but she had not studied the waters about their home as had her husband and son, and though she knew their many dangers, she could not, as Louis Everard did, follow the chebacca boat in its perilous course through the wild channel under Bald Head's shadow.

He had seen a rock grazed here, a broken reef avoided there, chebacca luffed sharp to keep off of a ragged island point, and he knew that the bold helmsman well understood his duty.

He had not heard of but one person on the coast who could make that run, and that one was Neptune Ned, who had daringly put the smack through there once in just such a blow, they being anxious to ~~come~~ one day, before a rising storm should catch them in the Devil's Net.

So he became more and more assured, as the chebacca came in, that it could be none other than Ned at the helm.

Yet why should his son be there in that little craft?

This question he could not answer for his own satisfaction, and as the chebacca boat drew nearer, the twilight deepened so that he could not distinctly see who it was at the helm.

He saw that there were four persons upon the chebacca boat, one in female attire, then a huge negro, and two others in sailor costume, one of the latter being the helmsman.

The one in female attire he observed kept close by the helmsman all the time, while the negro and sailor stood at the sheet ropes ready to do their duty at the command of the skipper.

After having so daringly run the fearful channel under the shadow of Bald Head, the chebacca boat had headed directly for the basin or haven where Louis Everard kept his little fishing smack and skiff.

The manner in which the chebacca ran into the harborage showed that the one at her tiller knew his way there as well as he did through the Blind Pass, across the Devil's Net, and around Bald Head.

Standing on the cliff Louis Everard saw the white sails of the chebacca boat run for the basin, and as it luffed up to avoid a bar which was there, but not visible, he gave vent to the expression that opens this chapter.

"Oh Louis! can it be our noble boy?" cried Mrs. Everard, her voice quivering with emotion.

"It is, I verily believe, and I shall run down to the landing."

"While I prepare supper, with every hope that it is he," and while Mrs. Everard started for the cabin, her husband hastened along the hill path which led to the shore below.

As he reached the cove, a boat suddenly ran upon the sands, and a voice called out:

"Father!"

"Ned, my noble boy!" and Captain Everard grasped the hands of his noble son, who had grown greatly in the year he had been gone, and was a splendid looking young sailor.

"I felt it, I knew it, when I saw you run those fearful waters, Ned," and the man's voice trembled with deep emotion.

"I had to take big chances, father, for I knew what to expect if taken, and I saw you and mother watching me, so wished to show away."

you that I had not forgotten the dear old coast in the long time I have been away.

"But I have much to tell you, and have now to present to you a young lady, to whom I owe my life."

"Bertie, this is my dear good father, Captain Louis Everard, and father this is Miss Bertie Buckner, a girl sailor, and I have told her she should have a home with us."

Captain Everard was surprised as there stepped from the boat a young girl and he hardly knew what to say.

Had Ned gotten married, bcy though he was, or had he run off with the young beauty?

Bertie seemed to divine his thoughts, and laughingly said:

"You must not think I have eloped with Ned, Captain Everard, for I have not, and he deserves all I have done for him."

"Who I am you shall soon know, and if you are indeed to make me welcome to your home, I shall be most happy."

"My dear child, you are indeed most welcome, and you must come right up to our house that my wife may greet you both."

"Come," and the happy fisherman led the way up the hillside, Ned chatting gayly as they went along.

As they drew near the cabin Neptune Ned gave his old-time call, which his mother knew so well, and with an answering cry of joy, the happy woman rushed forward to greet her son.

It was a touching meeting, and for a moment neither spoke, as the boy's strong arms were clasped about his mother.

Then Captain Everard led Bertie forward, and presented her to his wife, who received her without an atom of the suspicion which her husband had shown.

Going to the cabin, they found a log fire blazing briskly on the hearth, and Mrs. Everard had begun to prepare a most substantial supper.

Then Ned, as his mother continued her duties, told the story of his adventures—how he had gone to Melton Manor-house, to find the master dead, and the next heir, after the one who lay buried by his Gypsy wife upon the coast, absent in foreign seas on board his vessel.

Then he told of his visiting Molsey, the old Gypsy, and the distress his story had given them all.

He showed the necklace of gold links which the Gypsy had clasped about his neck, and said:

"Mother, this is yours, for a sailor must not wear a necklace."

Then Ned told of his shipping on the brig, the capture by the pirate, Redfern the Rover, and all that had followed, up to the time of his purchase of the chebacca, when he said:

"Father, I knew that you had only the little smack, and sadly needed a larger and better craft, and this was one motive for my buying the boat."

"But another was, that I know war is upon us, and I did not know but that a trim little craft like the Flying Fish would be most serviceable."

"It will be, Ned; but is there any news about the war?"

"Yes, sir, the colonists have fired upon a party of British soldiers, there was a riot in Boston, and the ports of the coast are to be blockaded."

"Indeed! then the brig-of-war off here is doubtless going to blockade the river?"

"Yes, sir, and she has a good pilot on board, as you doubtless saw, and will run up the river to-morrow, and for that reason I am anxious to go on up to-night and give up the cargo of the Flying Fish to the proper authorities."

"It would be best, for if they should search for you to-morrow, Ned, with that cargo they would hang you, for they would believe nothing you told them."

"No, father, and as soon as mother gives us supper I will start."

"And I will go with you, my son."

"I would be most glad to have you, father, and Bertie can stay with mother."

So it was arranged, and after a supper, that Ned said was better than any he had ever before known, the father and son set off for the chebacca boat, Mrs. Everard sending a basket of provisions to Simple Sam and Charcoal.

They were soon on board the Flying Fish, which was at once gotten under way and run out of the cove for the mouth of the river, Ned following a channel near in-shore, which he knew would enable him to avoid the brig-of-war, which he did not doubt was at anchor not far away.

Nor was his surmise wrong, for the brig was sighted, lying snugly at anchor, and riding out the blow, while the Flying Fish, unseen by those on her deck, crept by, ran into the mouth of the river, and shortly after midnight was alongside of the town wharf.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NEPTUNE NED'S RESOLVE.

NEPTUNE NED having gone to the homes of the town authorities, and aroused them, he told his story and led them back to the dock, where Captain Everard, with Charcoal and Simple Sam were busy discharging the cargo.

All hands turned in and helped, while carts were sent for to send the freight to the village warehouse, and by dawn the Flying Fish held only her ballast.

"I am confident, father, that the brig will run up the river, so Charcoal and Sam can run the Flying Fish up the river to some place of safety and keep her there until we know what is to be done, while you and I can wait here, and if the brig comes, go home by land."

"Yes, Ned, that is best," answered Captain Everard, and they went up to the inn to breakfast, while Ned became a hero, as the constable and other officers at once told of his exploit, as a secret of course, in escaping the British brig-of-war with his contraband freight.

As Ned had surmised, the brig was soon sighted coming up the river, and coming very slowly.

She had been firing down the river, but at what no one knew, and she was feeling her way along with just sail enough to steer her.

"She looks as though she was feeling her way without a pilot," said one.

"Oh, she has a pilot, and a good one on board," said Ned, who overheard the remark.

"That don't look like it," cried one, as the brig almost went upon a sunken rock.

"True, but she made no mistakes below."

"Maybe her pilot deserted her last night, not wishing to run her up to the town, for he must have come from hereabouts," said the chief constable.

This view seemed to be the right one, and all watched the brig as she came slowly toward the town.

"She's got her men at quarters."

"Yes, she looks hostile."

"Maybe she will burn the town."

"Wish we could board and take her, and it would be a good start for an American navy."

"No, we would only bring death and destruction upon us if we did so, while the trouble may blow over and we have no war after all," said Ned, who knew if the desperate spirits of the town were aroused they would do something to cause the brig to retaliate, and if she was captured, that a fleet would be sent into the river.

"Never mind, in another week or so we'll have some American soldiers swarming the old fort below, and then we will see what British craft can come up our river," said one.

"I move that we take this Britisher."

"Bravo for you, mate."

"She can be taken, for the wind is light, and we can raise a score of boats and fully three hundred men all well armed."

"We can take her, boys."

These suggestions were dangerous, and began to gain ground rapidly, and a most dangerous spirit was being invoked.

The brig was now little over a mile distant and coming directly toward the town.

The crowd numbered hundreds, and many of them were a bold, reckless lot.

The Press Gangs of the British ships had caused the coasting craft to stop sailing, and their crews fearing imprisonment were ashore.

Then the trading-coasters durst not run, or at least seldom attempted it, and great bitterness was felt on all sides by the Americans against the English.

Here there seemed a chance to retaliate, and it was certain that the one who proposed the capture of the brig-of-war was gaining allies rapidly.

"I say, mates, she carries nine guns to a broadside, is a snug craft, and can hardly have over a hundred men."

"They do not expect an attack, and we can form our boat fleet yonder behind the point, dash out upon her, and she is ours before they can kill half a dozen of us."

"What do you say, mates?" and the ring-leader looked over the crowd.

"One moment, mates," cried a voice, and all gazed upon him:

"Let us send fifty men down to the old fort, to man the big guns there, and so keep the brig from getting away, should we not take her."

"A good idea, Hal, and the guns are all right,

though the old fort has not had a garrison for many a day.

"You take your party to the fort, Hal, and I'll lead the boat attack," cried the ringleader.

There was at once the most intense excitement, but all became hushed as Neptune Ned called out:

"Attention a moment, friends!"

"Well, lad?" cried a chorus of voices.

"War is not declared yet, though the English have been most cruel, and some skirmishes have occurred.

"But if you take that brig, you will cause a fleet to come here and destroy this town, while you will not be the sufferers.

"Let her go in peace, until war begins, and then strike her; but not now."

Many sided with Neptune Ned, those who had houses and families; but the reckless ones laughed at his fears, and the ringleader divided his men to hasten away, one part to the old fort, they going by land, while his immediate command he ordered to the cove beyond the point, to arm themselves and get the boats ready.

Wise ones warned them, but they heeded not, and all became a chaos of excitement which no one could quell.

"Father, I will not see them bring ruin upon the town, and cause women and children to suffer," cried Ned.

"My son, nothing can be done, for they are mad."

"I will do something, sir."

"What can you do?"

"Wait and see."

And Neptune Ned walked away, taking a path down the river-bank, his movements being hidden from view by several large warehouses along the shore.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE YOUNG KING OF THE SEA.

WHEN Ned reached the last warehouse, he came upon a skiff that was tied to the dock.

Into this he sprang, and seizing the oars, shot out into the river.

At the town landing the crowd suddenly caught sight of him, and wild yells arose upon all sides.

The party to the fort had already gone, and those to attack in the boats were making their way to the cove behind the point of land, where they could not be seen by the approaching brig-of-war, which was now not over half a mile distant.

Other villagers and many reckless young sailors were constantly coming to the dock, many of them armed with muskets and pistols, for word had gone about that an English vessel intended attacking the town.

When Ned therefore shot out from the shelter of the warehouses, it was very plainly seen what his purpose was.

"The boy is a traitor!" yelled one.

"He is going to warn the brig and ruin all!" cried another.

"Shoot him!" shrieked a third, and above the shout that arose at this a score of muskets were discharged, while Captain Everard groaned in agony of spirit, now seeing Ned's bold resolve and fearing he would be slain.

But though the bullets pattered about the boy, and one buried itself in his starboard oar, he did not flinch but held right on, for he had been under fire before.

Those on the brig now seemed to realize what was going on, and an officer on the quarter-deck hailed:

"Ahoy, that boat!"

"Ahoy, the brig!" responded Neptune Ned, without looking around, while he still pulled hard for the vessel.

"Do you wish to come on board?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Stand by, men, to help him," ordered the officer, and a moment after Ned was on deck.

"Well, lad, are you a fugitive from justice?" said a splendid-looking officer as he approached him.

"No, sir, I have done no wrong in my mind, though many yonder think so."

"The truth is that our people have heard that fighting has begun between America and England, and they wished to capture your vessel, and have sent a party below to man the old fort, while twenty boats filled with men, will soon round yonder point to attack you."

"Ah! this is great news, and—"

"But, sir, it will not do for our people to fire on you, or for you to slaughter them, so I beg you to put back down the river, pass the fort before the garrison party get there to man the guns and open on you, and thus get to sea."

"Good advice, I assure you my fine fellow,

for I do not wish to do one act to bring on more trouble than now exists with the colonists; but the truth is my pilot went ashore after getting us nearly up to the town, and then deserted me.

"He pretended to wish to get the depth of water, and took two men in a boat, went ashore and left us, so we have had to feel our way up this far, as I am anxious to capture a little smuggler craft a fisherman told me had run up the river last night."

"I will pilot you out to sea again, sir."

"Can you do so?"

"I do not believe you could find any one who knows the coast better, sir," was the modest reply.

"Then I will accept your services, my lad, and reward you well; but there is a terrible storm sweeping up yonder."

"Yes, sir."

"Had we not better anchor in the river until it is over?"

"No, sir, for the boats will attack you anyhow, and the fort party will be ready to fire on you as you run out."

"But this looks like a tornado coming," and the young captain gazed anxiously at the fearfully black clouds sweeping down the river.

"It is one of our summer storms, sir, but I can run you out all right," said Ned, and he took the helm, ordered just what sail set he wanted, and showed all that he knew just what he was about.

As the wind suddenly came in a violent puff, he headed the brig down the river, just as the boats shot out from behind the point.

"Shall I send a load of grape into those boats for their boldness, Captain Hammond?" asked a lieutenant, addressing the handsome young captain who stood by the helm near Neptune Ned.

"No, Bostwick, I will do nothing to cause trouble, for we can easily run away from them under the guidance of this bold youth," was the answer.

"Is your name Captain Cecil Hammond, sir?" asked Ned, suddenly.

"Yes, my lad."

"Is this the brig-of-war *Restless*?"

"It is."

"Are you a younger brother of Lord Loyd Melton?"

"Yes, my lad," and the young officer seemed surprised.

"I have something of great importance to make known to you, sir, as soon as I have run the brig to a safe anchorage on the coast; but now I will have all I can do to manage the vessel, as this is a fearful storm sweeping down upon us," and Neptune Ned bent all his energies to the work before him.

And a fearful storm it was; the darkness seemed almost like night, the winds howling in mad fury, the waves of the river lashed into foam, and at times the banks being wholly lost sight of.

But Ned did not flinch, and won the admiration of all as he stood at his post.

It was a desperate gauntlet to run, but the brig made it in safety, passed the fort long before its amateur gunners reached there, and went out to sea in the coming night and in the face of another hurricane.

All breathlessly watched the daring young pilot, saw him take the brig out of the mouth of the river and from the dangers about them, and then, amid a blackness that was tangible, head in toward the coast once more, and after fighting a fight with death as it were, run into a sheltered harbor and give the order to let fall the anchor as he brought the brig up into the wind.

"Bravo, my Young King of the Sea!" cried the brig's captain, and he seized Ned by the hand.

A moment after he called out in words that rung through the vessel:

"Ahoy, my gallant tars! three British cheers for the Young King of the Storm!"

And three such cheers were given as gladdened the heart of Neptune Ned, who then asked the captain to give him a private interview in the cabin with him, and the British officer led the way, impressed by the manner of the brave boy.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

As the reader has doubtless surmised, Captain Cecil Hammond was the brother of Lord Loyd Melton, whom Ned had buried upon the coast with his Gypsy bride, and the youth told the full story, from his rescue of the life-boat to his escape from the *Restless* in the *Flying Fish* with the smuggler cargo on board.

The gallant English officer was deeply impressed with Ned's story, and listened most attentively, saying he would gladly accept the invitation of the "Young King of the Sea," as he insisted upon calling him, to go ashore to his cabin with him, for Ned was anxious to go at once.

So a boat was lowered, and half an hour after to the amazement of his father, who had come to the cabin on horseback and told his wife and Bertie the story, in walked Neptune Ned and Lord Melton, for by his brother's death he was such.

Then Ned showed him the articles left by his brother, and returning on board the brig that night the next morning took him to the grave in the nook.

"You shall have a middy's berth for this, my gallant Young Sea King," said the nobleman warmly.

"No, sir, I will not enter the British service against my country, though I thank you most sincerely, for if war comes I will go into our colonial navy when we get one," said Ned.

"Well said, lad, and my word for it you win a record second to none; but heaven avert a war between the English and our American cousins," fervently said Lord Melton, while Captain Everard uttered a fervent

"Amen!"

But the war did come, kind reader, and we won our independence, and Neptune Ned made a record that was a superb one, for he began on the *Flying Fish*, then went with his father upon a privateer, and ended the struggle in command of his own vessel, when he claimed as his wife pretty Bertie Buckner, the smuggler captain's daughter, who had loved the brave boy from girlhood to womanhood, and been most happy in the end in winning for her husband such a prize as was Neptune Ned, who indeed had a claim, after his exploits, to be known as The Young King of the Sea.

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